

THE SUNNY HOURS

AND OTHER STORIES

BY
C. R. MANDY

BOMBAY
THACKER & Co., LTD.
1943

FIRST PUBLISHED DECEMBER 1942
SECOND IMPRESSION OCTOBER 1943

Copyright

*Set & printed in India by C. Murphy for
Thacker & Company, Limited, at Thacker's Press,
Esplanade Road, Bombay
& Published by C. Murphy, Manager,
Thacker & Co., Ltd., Rampart Row, Bombay.*

CONTENTS

<i>EAST—</i>	<i>Page</i>
I THE SUNNY HOURS . . .	1
II THE LADY FROM LISBON . . .	9
III SUPREME MOMENT . . .	23
IV TEOCHIEW . . .	29
V MONSOON . . .	45
VI TRAGEDY IN RANGOON . . .	53
VII PHOEBE AND MORTIMER . . .	59
VIII ANNAMITE BOY . . .	67
IX THE ECCENTRICITY OF SWAY LIM . . .	81
X THE HOUSE OF BENEVOLENT PLENTY . . .	97
XI A GIFT FOR CHALEEO . . .	105
XII DIAGNOSIS . . .	113
XIII MAN'S AUTUMN . . .	125
XIV BEDTIME STORY . . .	135
XV A CHARTED LIFE . . .	143
XVI PERAHERA . . .	153
XVII ROSES OF OMAR . . .	161
XVIII SANCTUARY . . .	169
XIX UNTO THE HILLS . . .	188
XX THE HANDS OF PIETR CORNELIUS . . .	195
XXI DARK HAZARD . . .	209
XXII PICNIC AT ELEPHANTA . . .	221
XXIII ALANNAH'S DAY . . .	241
XXIV DEATH AT THE LIGHTHOUSE . . .	249

<i>WEST—</i>	<i>Page</i>
XXV THE ISLAND . . .	257
XXVI THE BAKER'S WIFE . . .	273
XXVII GHOSTS IN MAY . . .	287
XXVIII THE NIGHTINGALES ARE DUMB .	295
XXIX LADY WITH SALUKI . . .	309
XXX TO MOUNT JEROME . . .	315
XXXI NINA . . .	325
XXXII DEATH OF PTOLEMY . . .	339

Eighteen of these stories have been published in 'John O'London's Weekly,' The London 'Evening News,' 'The Standard,' 'The Star,' 'The Blue Peter,' The Calcutta 'Sunday Statesman,' 'The Illustrated Weekly of India' and 'The Argus' (Cape Town). The author is indebted to the Editors for permission to reprint.



THE SUNNY HOURS

IN those far-off days the City of Golden Pagodas was comparatively innocent of the progressive methods of the West. Motor-cars were then but a rumour from a foreign land, and gharries alone encroached upon the rickshaw's supremacy. Wide-brimmed straw boaters were the acknowledged headgear for European cricketers at the Cosmopolitan Club, while Grace-modelled beards were not unknown.

Cholera was a dreaded visitor during the hot weather: the Christian cemetery bore witness to its ravages. There, where the tomb's tranquillity is now seldom vexed save by a cicada's humming, the mass of cosmopolitan epitaphs multiplied exceedingly. The graves of juveniles with the briefest of

lives sprang up on all sides. The remains of hard-drinking Norwegian sea-captains lay adjacent to those of self-sacrificing Jesuits. At the far end of the cemetery the Menam flowed past serenely, the water glistening sharply through a lattice of flame-of-the-forest trees. A transient breeze would sigh in the casuarinas, beneath whose lace-like patterned shadows the bones of those 'old timers' crumbled yearly to an exile's dust——

*

*

*

THE middle-aged man stepped off the gangway of the Singapore boat. In his ears sounded the tribulation of the winches. He had eyes for everything, for he was returning to Thailand, the Land of the Free, after an absence of more than twenty years. A taxi approached him. On the drive from the wharf to the hotel, down avenues cloistral with tamarinds and rain-trees, he considered the metamorphosis in the city's appearance. In spite of the twenty years' hiatus he half-expected to see a gharry rounding each corner——

It was the hour of the *pai teo* or period of evening leisure. He was impressed by the number of cars which passed by, containing joy-riders of all nationalities. Bland, self-satisfied Chinese *towkays* were seated in crowded four-seaters with their ivory-faced wives and prolific families. Indian merchants with oiled hair and wide, symmetrical turbans were similarly 'eating the air.' The aristocratic youth of Siam drove past furiously in expensive sports models. A taxi filled with American tourists rattled past discourteously.

The middle-aged man was lost in reverie. The city, he reckoned, had nature against it. It was a widespread slum, rickshaw-infested, with its bowels spread out amorphously over the pancake-flat dullness of the Menam estuary. The many *Klongs*, or canals, were turgid and malodorous. The architecture was of a mushroom nature, unimaginative and squalid. But the inhabitants—they stoned for these defects. They were the integral cause of the nostalgic attachment which the middle-aged man had for so many years felt for the land. They were pleasant to the sight. They wore bright, exhilarating garments; their faces were tranquil and kind. They could observe nature for long periods without exhibiting the restless boredom of the Occidental. They were happy with their thoughts—gentle and easily amused. The Siamese peasant did not importune the world to show him her breasts.

The middle-aged man awakened from his reverie. The car was passing over a bridge. He could see a family of Siamese bathing in the still water beneath. The soothing laughter of the children echoed in the swift dusk. The wavelets made by their movements sparkled like quicksilver round their tawny skins.

The middle-aged man uttered a comfortable sigh. Already the moon was rising like a golden coin at the rim of the paddy fields. The shrill yet soporific chorus of the crickets pervaded the atmosphere in increasing volume.

Five minutes later the car drew up at a large

hotel in the suburbs. As he searched for the ticals to pay the fare, the middle-aged man heard the chauffeur addressing him in polite tones——Did the *tuan* wish to go for a drive that night?——the winter fair was being held at the Golden Mountain. Might he act as a guide for the *tuan*?——No?——perhaps another night? The fellow was returning despondently to the car when he heard his fare speaking to him. He was to come back to the hotel at ten o'clock—the *tuan* had changed his mind. He would visit the fair at the Golden Mountain.

The chauffeur bowed. His handsome face broke into a contented smile. He would earn sufficient this evening to sleep for a week!

*

*

*

It was three hours later—that post-prandial period when a good cigar adds to the mind's ease. The middle-aged man sat expectantly beside the lotus pool on the hotel lawn. The air was full of the fragrance of jasmine flowers. It was very pleasant sitting there under the tall casuarinas. Lissomely the trees bent forward at the whim of a capricious breeze. Their lean, tormented boughs shivered musically. A couple of fireflies flickered waywardly across the lawn.

The middle-aged man drew at his cigar with a deep satisfaction. To-night he would recapture his lost youth—those sunny hours which he had spent twenty years ago, enjoying the busy, gay, delightful night life of the city. He would again spend pleasant moments in the cabarets with tiny, de-

corative Siamese dancing girls, charmingly flirtatious maidens with skins like brown moonlight and eyebrows taut and delicate as silken twine. Already he could picture them kitten-like pawing his clothes, examining his watch with gentle hands.

They would be clad as of old in glossy blue tunics embroidered with dragons of gold—the middle-aged man had found happiness again. A primitive joy overflowed from his features.

A moment later the smiling chauffeur appeared at his side. Was the *tuan* ready to visit the fair at the Golden Mountain?

They set out towards the artificial hill in the centre of the city. The moonlight flooded the scene with an elfin enchantment. Each temple was now a supreme wonder, a maze of shimmering roofs coruscating in the bright moonshine. At the Mountain itself the milky serenity of the scene was disturbed at intervals by displays of fireworks—catherine wheels and golden rain—which cleft the sky with meteoric colours. Amongst the many booths at the base of the Mountain the slow masses of the people wound their way towards the summit shrine, exactly as they had done twenty years before. Everybody was happy. There was music—the strumming of an aggressive banjo, the filigree notes of a mandoline, the sensuous irritation of a Siamese guitar, assaulted the ears in repeated onsets.

The middle-aged man leant forward and touched the driver on the shoulder. The latter smiled as he heard his fare's request. The *tuan* wished to

dance. Where was there a good cabaret? The driver nodded and smiled again. He would bring the *tuan* to the finest cabaret in the land, a cabaret with the prettiest Siamese girls, petite, with round faces and mischievous glances—the *tuan* would enjoy himself there!

They drove a long way out into the suburbs and finally drew up at an illuminated building standing in an ornamental garden. They were admitted by a burly Indian watchman. Large bowls of goldfish bordered the doorways. From inside came the unbroken rhythm of a jazz band. The floor was crowded. A discordant twittering of voices filled the hall, in which a diversified audience occupied the rows of wicker chairs. A ballet was being performed on the stage at the far-end of the room. Meditatively, elderly Siamese sat watching the *puyings* whose palms were turned upwards and whose hips swayed meaningly to a monody of native music. Danes and Tynesiders were there, Chinese and Filipinos, along with silent, inscrutable Malays wearing gay, truculent sarongs.

The middle-aged man seated himself at a vacant table and watched the scene with a nostalgic interest. The dancers had changed little in twenty years. Their olive-brown eyes continued to sparkle with amorous invitation, their sleek hair shone like liquorice.

Soon one of the dancing partners approached him. She was a slim, pretty girl with a touch of Chinese blood, he guessed, judging from the light colour of her skin. He bade her sit down and

ordered a cherry brandy for her. The irises of her brown eyes danced with incredible swiftness from one corner to the other. The pleasantly perfumed odour of her person hovered before his nostrils. She spoke English well. They danced together and he found that the girl had a personality which was lacking in most of the other partners, who were coy and vivacious according to plan.

She fancied he was a tourist visiting the city. They spoke of the temples and the celebrated snake park.

At midnight, when the cabaret closed, she invited him to her house for coffee. They made their way in the moonlight to the waiting car. The smiling chauffeur bowed courteously as they seated themselves therein. They drove down a series of dark alleyways and at last stopped at an unkempt hovel with an attap-roof. The girl, laughing with grave delight, drew forth a key from her waist.

"I'm not rich," she said, "and I'll tell you something that'll surprise you."

In the penetrating moonlight the middle-aged man could see the irises of her eyes dancing with a lively humour.

"What's that?" he enquired as they entered the small, wooden building.

"The chauffeur—Chaleco—is my husband! You are one of the few men who haven't kissed me in the car—he'll be surprised! We are poor but we manage to live. Chaleco is sometimes lucky with his taxi. He meets the ships and occasionally gets

overpaid. Don't you think he is handsome?"

The middle-aged man agreed, as expected of him, and the girl began to make coffee on the brick stove. While he sat in the sole wooden chair she chattered pleasantly, flitting moth-like from one topic to another.

"Would you recognize me as an Eurasian?" he suddenly heard her ask.

"I imagined you were half-Chinese," he answered. She burst into laughter, musical and unrestrained.

"No, no! I'm half-English." She went across to a cupboard. "My mother was also a dancer—a Lao. She died in the smallpox epidemic ten years ago. My father gave her this picture before I was born."

She handed the photograph to the middle-aged man and then turned to the stove. She did not see his face as he surveyed the picture—a faded portrait of himself as a young man.

"Do you take milk in your coffee?" she asked, her back still turned.





II. THE LADY FROM LISBON

DOM FERNANDES, Viceroy of Goa, stretched himself in his long cane chair and felt at ease with life. Industriously a worthy convert fanned the troublesome gnats away from his person. A jar of well-cooled Andalusian wine was ready for consumption at his elbow. The singing of the acolytes at their vespers in the cathedral echoed soothingly to his thoughts through the darkening quietude. The day's work was over and his ministrations towards his subjects conscientiously carried out.

An interesting day, he mused, as he watched the two gazelle-eyed Malabari slaves seated by the hour-glass in the veranda. Their minds, he knew, were alert for his command and he was pleased with his power. He had been just and had exerted his authority in a seemly fashion that morning. He had ordered two heretics to be exhibited in the stocks outside the cathedral, had witnessed the progress of the new frescos of St. Francis' convent, and lent his patronage to the madrigal players' musick. The new envoy from the Mogul Court and his retinue had been honourably welcomed on their 'elliphants'; two thieving wantons had been flagellated and put in chains, and an emissary despatched to the King of Goleonda with a trade proposition. A busy day for Dom Fernandes, who felt he deserved his relaxation. Outside, the fading twilight was already strident with the buzzing of nocturnal insect life.

Dom Fernandes sipped his wine slowly, his tongue savouring its pleasing bouquet with a great relish. Sometimes at this hour he would summon Young Anselm to read to him. The youth had a clear, resonant voice and read the classics with vigour and perception. To-night, however, the Viceroy felt too drowsy—the moist sea wind was upon him—and he fancied there would be time for a beneficial sleep before his factotum, Emmanuel, announced that his evening meal was prepared. Through half-closed, heavy-lidded eyes he was aware that an ochrous moon was rising amongst the fronds of the palms bordering the inlet nearby. In

its radiance the white sails of a departing dhow were visible. Very faintly Dom Fernandes could hear the dull, narcotic booming of the surf upon the beach, and its redundancy was a lullaby to his senses——

His gross features and obese body were pallid in the nascent moonlight as the worthy convert faithfully wielded his fan.

Luxuriously the Viceroy slept.

*

*

*

HE was soon awakened by a hubbub of voices and shuffling feet. The measured trot of mules resounded from the roadway outside the palace. *Gallegos* were shouting for custom and the chattering of the *Kolis* filled the air. The cathedral bells were ringing. The night, so quietly moonlit before, was now boisterous with half the populace of the city passing his gates, and Dom Fernandes knew that the special frigate from Lisbon had arrived. This was an occasion. He rose quickly, still clammy with sleep. Silently Emmanuel appeared from the shadows, bowing obsequiously, and Dom Fernandes called for his best doublet and hose. In the light of two large tallow reeds he donned his crimson finery with an emotion of vast self-importance. Emmanuel devoutly and dexterously pomaded his master's thinning curls and heavily powdered the gross, perspiring jowl. He never realised that his master was an abnormally ugly man; he was only cognisant that Dom Fernandes was the epitome of power in Goa, the man who could nonchalantly send heretics to the *strapado*,

who could afford to be supercilious towards jewel-deck'd Mogul chamberlains, and wear the finest watered silks at all times. So Emmanuel worshipped his master with a canine attention. His master's vanity seemed to him as worthy and belittling as the feathered hat upon his master's cranium.

Half an hour later, as he was fixing the Viceroy's frilled lace cuffs, the hangings near the veranda were set aside and the two Malabari slaves ushered in a portly, heavily-moustached gentleman dressed in a mariner's rig. On seeing Dom Fernandes he ran forward and embraced him warmly.

"Gonzales, my dear fellow, that is a pleasure. We did not expect you this moon," exclaimed Dom Fernandes with genuine pleasure.

"We had fair winds from Araby, Milord," Gonzales answered, smoothing his wide moustaches and allowing a slave to sprinkle rose-water and bergamot on his person.

They seated themselves and the worthy convert produced wine-glasses while Emmanuel laid a meal for two, knowing that Gonzales was one of his Master's few intimate friends, who would sup with him and share his subtle humour, relaxing perchance towards bawdy merriment as the evening wore on and the empty decanters of wine multiplied.

Dom Fernandes spoke animatedly to the mariner: a self-assured, omnipotent *hidalgo* he looked, seated there in his hard-pressed silken bodice, the glint of candlelight illumining his well-

pomaded hair.

"And the cargo; my good Gonzales?" he enquired eagerly as soon as they had begun their meal of oysters and roast kid.

"The usual, Your Excellency—officials, edibles, aperients, cockades——"

"And——?" muttered Dom Fernandes expectantly.

"And the women."

"The women, bless 'em," breathed Dom Fernandes with satisfaction.

"A poor bevy, Your Excellency. A buxom, languid flock. A twist of frigid dams, Milord—a posse of cattle-dumb females without a roving eye amongst them! Twenty-five of them and the scruvy hath ravaged three. S'Truth the present Government at Lisbon are poor choosers. 'Tis the Cardinal's policy to balance poverty of looks and dearth of charm with amplitude of dowry."

"Twenty-five you say! and three ravaged by the scurvy! and we have fifty applications," boomed the Viceroy. "'Tis an uncommon poor lot where the balance is all chaff. Fifty virgins of comely bearing, was the requirement, good sir. Thine eyes, Gonzales, are still in fair vision?"

The mariner glanced down indecisively at his buckled velvet shoes. This was not the kind of task he relished. After a moment he looked up and stared fearlessly into Dom Fernandes wine-heavy eyes.

"There is one, Your Excellency—aged seventeen. She is from the convent beyond Cintra."

“Her name?”

“The senhorita Lucia, Your Excellency.”

* * *

“*Faune, Nympharum fugientum amator, per meos fines et aprica rura—*” the voice of Young Anselm echoed resonantly through the great candle-lit apartment in the Viceroy’s residence, a praiseworthy scholarly voice where the shades of meaning were self-evident from the reader’s skillfully modulated tones. Dom Fernandes always enjoyed Young Anselm’s reading—especially of his favourite Odes of Horace. As for the youth himself, the Viceroy sometimes fancied he could make a good living in the Lisbon theatres, for he had, besides his golden voice, a handsomeness of presence which the senhoras by the Tagus would have much appreciated. The lad’s face was as classic and pleasant as his voice. His romantic russet-coloured hair immediately attracted the attention of the few Portuguese wives in Goa whom sometimes he chanced to see riding in their palanquins to the madrigal player’s musick in the evenings.

This evening the familiar Odes failed to arouse the Viceroy’s enthusiasm. Young Anselm soon realised that he was reading to a disinterested audience.

Dom Fernandes’ thoughts were distracted by recent events. The Lisbon frigate, laden with ivory, ebony, emeralds from Golconda, and knick-knackery, had already departed on its long return journey to the Western World. Captain Gonzales had been accommodating, and everything—except

for the disposal of certain members of the female cargo—had gone to schedule. Some of the senhoritas from Lisbon had proved to be too uncouth even with their dowries as bait. Rejected by all the Portuguese officials, a couple had gone so far as to enter the harem of a potentate in the mountainous country behind Goa.

Dom Fernandes' face now bore a dreamy felicitous expression which had been observed with wonderment by all the Malabari slaves. The Viceroy had never been so contented ; he seldom raised his voice in anger nowadays, he sent fewer culprits to the stocks——

Dom Fernandes had fallen in love.

When Captain Gonzales had smuggled to him the young Lucia, he had been amazed by her beauty. Nobody in the theatre at Lisbon possessed such loveliness as Lucia ; there was no blemish in her form or features. She was like a rare entrancing flower, fresh as the monsoon rain. To the Viceroy her eyes were diamonds, her lips rubies, her very existence a superb, tantalising dream in the recesses of his mind, a dream, moreover, which would happily materialise. His official work suffered from his infatuation. For long periods he gazed abstractedly out to sea, his meditations remote from the dossiers which encircled him. The depredations of pirates and the theological politics of the English and the Dutch no longer received his grave attention. At High Mass in the cathedral his thoughts were far away.

Twice daily he visited the girl at the cathedral

convent where she was in the Mother Superior's care. He had decided to marry her in a month's time, and he knew that she would be the loveliest Vicereine in Ind. He would give a great feast to the poor after the wedding, a munificent tamasha which would be noised abroad to the Mogul Court, to the realms of Golconda, and perchance to Tartary itself. His State visits to neighbouring rajahs and nawabs would be greatly enhanced by her presence : his life would be complete now with this rare lily as his partner. The fleeting years would slip away in happiness, and he would eventually retire with her to a 'Sabine farm' near Lisbon.

Dom Fernandes felt supremely contented. Young Anselm momentarily surveyed his master's coarse, preoccupied countenance. It sometimes seemed in his imagination that his master's swollen gills were the colour of a stormy sunset sky, while, after sleep, they appeared to him to be pale and revolting as a strange disease. Dom Fernandes, he was convinced, urgently required blood-letting.

"Enough, enough," cried Dom Fernandes with a yawn. Young Anselm rose to go. At the curtain he bowed with assumed servility. He was glad to get away from that satyr's overpowering presence. Outside it was moonlight and a steady breeze blew in from the Arabian Ocean. The tang of the sea was keen in his nostrils. He decided to take a swim in the moonlit cove beyond the city's walls. Down to the deserted beach he strode buoyantly. Tall palms, silhouetted in the moonlight, leant

amiably towards the ocean as he stepped lightly upon their interwoven shadows. The musick from a guitar came faintly over the breeze——

He found the water pleasant and exhilarating. Blissfully he turned somersaults amongst the sparkling wavelets, while the shoals of escaping fry leapt across his body in the form of phosphorescent rain. Every memory of Dom Fernandes' overpowering presence was eliminated in this carefree moonlit frolic. Young Anselm lay on his back and gazed at the necklets of stars above, and he no longer felt himself the ill-paid servitor of a tyrannical nabob, but a prince in his world which, at the moment in those moon-clear shallows, was a fantasia of surpassing beauty.

Then the corner of his eye caught the movement of a dark object beneath the palms on the beach. He had not expected an intruder at that late hour. He was further surprised to see that the dark object was unmistakably a woman. He swam to the other corner of the cove where his clothes lay upon the sand. As he dressed himself hurriedly he was aware that the indistinct blur under the palms had not moved. Curiosity seized him. Possibly the lady was one of the officials' wives awaiting her *cavelheiro*. He would have to pass her on his way back. He wondered if she had been amused by his boisterous antics in the water.

She made no movement at his approach. He could see clearly her black dress and her graceful lace mantilha. Someone slim and young, and either very daring or a wanton, for no female would

venture out thus at night without her duenna. He was about to pass her silently when her voice broke the stillness.

"A fair evening, senhor," she said calmly.

"A fair evening, senhorita," he answered politely, catching a glimpse of the girl's face in the moonlight. Her countenance was as thrilling as the night and held him spellbound.

"Thou art Anselm?"

Young Anselm swallowed his surprise with difficulty. To be greeted by a most comely female in this moonlit fairyland was unexpected enough, but that the lady should know his name was wondrous indeed.

"Aye, senhorita, I am Anselm. And how befalleth it that thou shouldst know my title?"

"I have seen thee from my window at the convent and at the evening musick. The convent novices are impassioned with thee. They told me thy caption, Anselm."

She said the words slowly, looking upon him with unconcealed admiration.

"And thy name, senhorita?" enquired young Anselm with fervour in his tone.

The girl did not answer for some moments and the night's quietude seemed troubled. A wavelet broke nearby upon the sand, to dissipate itself close to their feet. Then she spoke in a whisper which seemed to him to be fraught with uneasiness.

"I am called Lucia."

Young Anselm gasped audibly.

"Thou art *his* Lucia," he cried involuntarily, in a shocked unsteady voice.

"Yea, I am his Lucia, if God so disposeth," she murmured.

And Anselm could see the tears in her lovely eyes.

*

*

*

Dom Fernandes sat in his richly-tapestried Durbar-Hall, surrounded by a group of grandees and officials. The days had gone by pleasantly and his marriage festivities were drawing nigh. The officials were at hand with the final arrangements for the wedding, drawn up with meticulous care. Under a long, embroidered punkah they sat, heavy with sweat in their impressive silks and satins. Old Lobo, whom the Viceroy dubbed his most especial *fidus Achates*, had marshalled the populace in their responsive duties. It was a difficult task, for Dom Fernandes, apart from the esteem which his high rank assured for him, had never been popular either with the officials, the clergy, or the citizens. Clemency was not in his nature; he might have been one of his favourite Roman emperors in a former life. The casting of heretics to the lions was not beyond his vision, had there been any lions in Goa. Latterly, however, the infidels in Goa had been subjected to an unwonted leniency and the stocks in front of the cathedral stood empty for many days.

All was now set fair for the marriage ceremony. The potentates from the hinterland had sent befitting tokens of emeralds and rubies; pirateers, from material reasons, despatched pearls, and a gift of bejewelled 'elliphants' from the Mogul envoy was the cynosure of all eyes. The palace

smiled with silver and the perfumes of the Orient were lavishly bestowed.

An address was being read out flamboyantly by one of the seniormost officials. In spite of its fawningly eulogistic phrases Dom Fernandes found it mildly boring. He watched the flies settling on Lobo's nose and greatly enjoyed the old man's discomfort. Then he commenced to think of his Lucia, whom he was to visit when the assembly disbanded. That morning, he had apprised the Mother Superior's handiwork at the convent. Lucia, commended to the spiritual care of Saint Catherine, was a dream of enchantment in her virginal white draperies. His breath had been completely taken away by her loveliness. The Mother Superior groomed Lucia well. She was already an aristocrat in appearance, and he reckoned that the mannerisms and suavity of a Vicereine could be successfully instilled in her after marriage. She lacked vivacity—frowned Dom Fernandes—and the loveliness in her eyes was as yet too melancholy for his tastes. He could not understand why Lucia should be triste with the prospect of such exaltation before her.

The Viceroy's arrogant eyes stared out from his fat, rubicund face at the officials around him—a meandering, dull lot, he decided. The sweat was trickling down Lobo's cheeks; the thin, dark beard which blossomed on the old man's chin was now a confusion of flies. Discomfort was rampant amidst those hot ruffs—Dom Fernandes smiled with pleasure.

Through the patio in the background a vista of

the sea showed itself. On the horizon dark clouds were gathering and at lessening intervals lightning flashed vividly above the ocean's crest. A great storm was brewing.

"On behalf of the citizens of our Golden City, I have the honour——"

Dom Fernandes, his nostrils satiated with the abundant incense of flattery, glanced dully at the individual who was reading from a roll of gilt script. The rigmarole had little meaning to him. He was imagining the Mother Superior as he imparted sound advice to Lucia on her marriage deportment. The Mother Superior was a good, compliant female who discreetly understood his aims and carried them out with laudable delicacy. From her, Lucia would achieve the requisite knowledge of Venus' graces.

"—This noble occasion—blessed of the Virgin——"

The black clouds on the horizon appeared to be forming themselves into a waterspout. Dom Fernandes, gazing beyond the speaker's head, watched them with interest. The 'angry scorn of winged Pegasus' lay therein. The storm was in keeping with the tumultuous emotions which were surging through his being. Soon the laudations would be over and his palanquin ready to bear him to the convent.

"We humbly beg Your Excellency——"

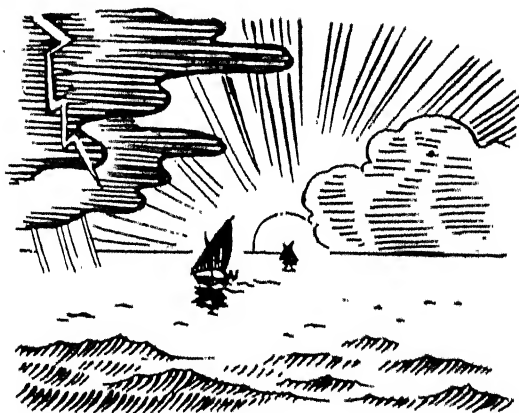
The speaker's words were interrupted by a roar of thunder which resounded stertoriously over the city. The eyes of the assembly covertly turned towards the ocean and the saturnine sky. At that

moment an object came into view beyond the headland—an open boat outward-bound, rocking violently on the waves which each moment were growing in turbulence. Dom Fernandes saw it. Two figures were dimly visible in the vessel, around which the lightning played threateningly. “A tiny sail over the Tyrrhene sea,” mused Dom Fernandes, his mind on a favourite Ode.

Then his mood changed. “A pair of cloddish fishermen—gone to their fate,” he concluded sadistically.

The aura of the maturing storm hung heavily over the assembly as the speeches terminated. A trumpeter blew shrilly through his instrument. Dom Fernandes rose from his throne. Accompanied by two pages he strode pompously down the line of bowing officials.

He was eager to reach the convent before the rain set in.



III. SUPREME MOMENT

THE morning was still cold with the chill of the autumnal night. The sun, a globe of splendour, rose majestically over the saffron fields in the wide valley below Gulmarg. The peaks of Haramukh and Mahadeo were as yet a grey silhouette crowned with cumulus in the north east.

The four thin-hammed Kashmiri coolies were waiting expectantly outside the boarding-house verandah. They were clad in rags of foul odour and the sleep was still in their eyes. They were waiting with a *dhooly* for the old memsahib who paid them so generously for their services. For three mornings now they had carried her to the crest of the hill amongst the conifers where, shortly after sunrise, she had gazed with intense exhilaration at the peak of Nanga Parbat which dominated the distant panorama across the vale of Kashmir. It was a superb sight; even the coolies, whose minds were preoccupied with attaining the wherewithal for food, women and gambling, were awed by the wonder of the scene. From the hill crest they had three times clearly seen the peak itself, a snowy pink cone above the banks of cloud, so lofty that it seemed a rampart of heaven itself; the summits of Haramukh and Mahadeo were almost dwarfish in comparison. It was truly an enchanting sight, yet the coolies could not understand why

the old memsahib should wish to see the mountain each morning after sunrise. All these sahibs were a little mad, unremittingly hitting the small white ball over the Gulmarg hillside, but the old memsahib, it seemed to them was the craziest of all. It was not as if she prayed to the Gods of the Mountain; she merely remained motionless and placid-faced in the *dhooly*.

But no one had ever paid them so well. They were already envied by all the syces and bazariwallahs in Gulmarg.

Awakening to life, the four of them blew vigorously through their chilled fingers. One of them lit a *bidī* while another expatiated on the charms of the new mate he hoped to procure. Allah had indeed been compassionate in sending the old memsahib across their path.

At that moment their attention was drawn to the verandah. The old lady had appeared. She was incredibly aged and stout, like the pictures of the Great White Queen. Her eyes, yet in a wrinkled countenance of moon-clear whiteness, were ablaze with determination and self-will. Regally she summoned the coolies to the verandah and with a rat-like celerity the men obeyed her command. The *dhooly* was placed securely in position and the old lady, assisted by an ayah, was seated to her satisfaction in a sea of rugs and cushions. Her equinely sensitive nostrils breathed in deeply of the freshness of the morning.

"Asti jao," she said imperiously while the quartette lifted her carefully to shoulder height.

Very slowly they started out for the crest of the hill.

* * *

As they made their way steadily through the conifers, whose stems shone pink in the waxing sunlight, the old lady felt less sure of herself. She was not feeling so well this morning, nevertheless she had been hot-tempered with the ayah for suggesting that she should rest in bed. Her display of anger had encroached upon her store of vitality. She could sense the pulses throbbing abnormally in her temples and there was no warmth in her body in spite of the plethora of rugs ; her timeworn hands were frigidly blue. She knew that the manageress of the boarding-house was disapproving and apprehensive and had questioned the ayah, so that her stubbornness had increased. But the quality of obstinacy, she considered, was one of the few pleasures left in old age, though she had little opportunity to be successfully stubborn during all those years at Worthing. Querulous she had often been when Hilda had shepherded her along the dreary promenade for the sake of exercise. Poor Hilda ! in a narrow spinsterish way she had been a good daughter and her death was a blow. The old lady shuddered involuntarily, not from the cold but from a vision of those long barren years at Worthing—that promenade with the parade of bathchairs and Pekinese dogs, and the retired Colonel from Jubbulpore who brazenly wore a panama hat until the equinoctial gales intervened, and the cold Sunday suppers, and

servant trouble——that was the nightmarish existence she had endured since Ralph's death so very long ago——yet it did not seem more than fifty years since she and Ralph had spent their honeymoon in this same vale of Kashmir. She could remember the journey by relays of tonga up the Jhelum valley, and the scent of irises, and Ralph's energetic tones as he superintended the pitching of the tents——those were glorious days when Ralph was a promising member of the Indian Civil Service and the station was chuckling over the early writings of Mr. Kipling.

The old lady sighed; she could remember the moonlight through the chinar trees in their valley camp, and the cuckoos serenading each other at dawn in the apricot orchards, and Ralph's infectious enchantment when he showed her Nanga Parbat at sunrise near Barramulla. She could recollect so many things temporarily obscured by those long years at Worthing——swift felicitous memories which, darting through her brain, caused her heart to flutter wildly.

By the time they reached the crest of the hill she was feeling inordinately sleepy. The chill throughout her body seemed to be deepening. Then she heard the coolies muttering together animatedly and she realised that the purpose of her visit was in vain, for the peak of Nanga Parbat was not clear and miraculous as it had been on the previous mornings. It was now obscured by masses of pink cloud, as if the contents of a feather bed had been wilfully scattered over the summit.

Her disappointment would have been keener if she had not felt so sleepy. Desperately she tried to clear her brain of its drowsy rhythms. Nothing was coherent any longer. At one moment she seemed to hear Hilda's voice saying sharply "But, Mother, you *must* take prunes," and then it was Ralph's voice in the shadows of the moonlit tent—and the scent of irises—and Ralph telling her teasingly that she was by far the most beautiful thing in the valley——

Suddenly she was aware that the coolies were unduly agitated. They were gesticulating violently and pointing towards the heaven-high peak now looming in full austerity across the valley. The plume of cloud was dispersing——. The old lady felt that the mountain was displaying itself to her especial pleasure. She half sat up in the *dhooly* with excitement.

This was a supreme moment.

Nanga Parbat was visible in all its splendour. It mesmerised her. There was no view so wonderful in all the world——and Ralph was whispering in her ear, enchantedly and jestfully——

"Its obliging us, my dear."

"Its terribly cold, Ralph," she answered with a sigh.

The coolies, hearing the old memsahib's voice, turned their glance from the sight of the majestic peak. They saw that the old lady's eyes were no longer fixed on the mountain. They were closed now in a countenance serene and waxen——

The men looked fearfully at each other as they set out on the return journey. Allah had been good to them. It might be that the old memsahib was but sleeping——



IV. TEOCHIEW

IF you were to translate the characters painted on the mud-stained edge of his vehicle you would find that Kim Huat was his name, and you would learn that he was a Teochiew Chinese, the fully licensed owner of a rickshaw. Unlike the general run of his compatriots, he did not hire the vehicle from a tyrannous pawnbroker for a daily fee. When he had first come south to the land of the White Elephant, he had been forced to do so ; but he had saved carefully, adding to his hoard of satangs each night, concealing them astutely in the flooring of the attap-covered sampan which served as a home.

It had taken him many months to accumulate the necessary payment, for he also regularly remitted money to China to his wife and his two children, to his parents and his mother-in-law at Swatow—a greedy harridan, whose allowance he reckoned as the cost of so many pipefuls of good opium lost.

Besides these expenses he had to reserve sufficient money for his weekly visit to the Street of the Green Lantern, where, in the rachitic mass of coffee shops, he found a different favourite according to his week's earnings. When he was affluent he could afford to ignore those of the amorously importunate "pu-yings" who suffered from squints,

over-wide mouths and domesticated figures.

Then he could choose with discrimination a slim, red-lipped, pallid-faced beauty, whose oblique eyes exuded her latent passion.

These items had seriously depleted his hoard. Nevertheless, after exercising an inherent sense of economic caution he became the sole owner of a second-hand rickshaw and a comfortable sampan. The latter was moored in a klong adjacent to the main river, or Mother of the Waters, where the teak logs floated down to the wharves after their slow journey from the mountainous northern forest.

Here were also hundreds of junks, whose brown sails resembled butterflies' wings. Often in the evenings, after a profitable day, Kim Hunt would paddle his sampan through the alleyways of junks and feast his eyes on the fascination of the scene. Everything, from the floating carcass of a dog to the bibulous behaviour of a foreign sailor or the dancing of the phosphorus on the water, was of interest to him.

As a luxury he would sometimes buy a plate of Shark's fin at one of the many ambulant kitchens which clustered along the quays. And then, with delicious inertia, it was his custom to lie back on his hard wooden pillow and watch the stars or listen somnolently to the strange cries of the sweet-meat vendors at the waterside—his stomach replete with rice, his senses saturated with a strenuously gained bliss.

He was dreaming thus one evening a month

previous to Chinese New Year. The weather was cold, and he had muffled himself up to the ears in his thick red blanket. The night was quiet and starlit; already the moon was climbing above the prangs of the big pagoda across the sleeping river.

He was almost asleep when the sudden, violent rocking of the sampan brought him back to his normal alertness. He thought of the possibility of robbers, for the imminence of New Year made it a likely season for nocturnal prowling.

An oar splashed in the water near by.

He got up to investigate. Two figures were silhouetted in an uncovered sampan five yards away. Then a voice hailed him in his own tongue. At first he could not understand the friendly greeting, since he had no intimate friends—for friends, he found, had a habit of borrowing money—and none of his fellow rickshaw-pullers knew where his sampan was moored. Cautiously, he watched the newcomers as they fastened their craft to the stern of his own.

One was a middle-aged man clad in a loin-cloth. He was excessively corpulent; his double chins were grotesquely like the jowl of a turkey-cock, and the protuberant rolls of flesh at his waist were distinctly visible in the moonlight. The other individual—an old man—had hollow cheeks and long, ungainly features; he was wearing a dark tunic and trousers.

This made Kim Huat suspicious; he knew that dacoits and their kind favoured black garments. But his doubts were soon dispelled by the fat man

who offered him a cigarette and sat down beside him speaking boisterously with a frank joviality. His name, he said, was Pi Boon.

"Are you not cold?" Kim Huat then asked him, observing his huge form with wonder.

"The Demon of Cold troubles me not. I have plentiful flesh," Pi Boon answered with a friendly smirk.

The ice was broken and they conversed freely. They spoke of food and their mother country, of women and the poll-tax, of the most comfortable opium dens, and of love. Soon Kim Huat had given full details of his family history to Pi Boon, who sympathised with him in the matter of his mother-in-law at Swatow, and praised him generously as a dutiful son and father. During this conversation the old man with the hollow cheeks had remained silent, emitting only an occasional monosyllable when addressed by his companion. His name was Ah Kien. He appeared to Kim Huat as a morose, timid fellow, without opinions on any subject.

Then Pi Boon suggested that they should take a dish of "bamee" together in the Sampeng. This invitation surprised Kim Huat, for the Sampeng—the big Chinese quarter of the city—was a long way off. He was further surprised when Pi Boon intimated that they would travel there by motor-car. For a moment he began to wonder whether he was not still dreaming beneath his blanket. Then he saw that the yellow moon had risen high above the topmost spire of the pagoda opposite.

With Pi Boon and the hollow-cheeked old man he went ashore.

*

*

*

ALTHOUGH it was well after midnight, the streets near the Sampeng were a motley of light and gaiety. To drive along them was a source of much exhilaration to Kim Huat. It was not often that he had the chance of a free trip in a motor-car, and it was with an exultant contempt that he viewed the men of his own occupation—the rickshaw-pullers, bestial in the plodding measure of their gait.

Kim Huat scanned them with scorn and pitied their lot. He also prayed that one of his co-workers might see him riding majestically and “eating the air” from the depths of a motor-car. Meanwhile Pi Boon, who had clothed his nudity in an ill-fitting singlet, found an outlet for his loquacity by describing the sights of the city to his friends. He chuckled loudly as he pointed out the scintillant electrical advertisement depicting a hand pouring out a bottler of beer; he shouted orders to the Siamese chauffeur in worldly-wise tones; he flung amorous greetings to the maidens in the pawnshops they passed.

Then they stopped the car at a Punch and Judy show, and Pi Boon paid thirty satangs for the party to enter a tent where they saw, among other things, a bearded lady and a crocodile.

It was wonderful, Kim Huat thought. Out in the suburbs, where he was accustomed to ply for trade, life was dull and monotonous—a dog fight

was an event there—but here his vision was dazzled by a profusion of splendid sights. Even the Street of the Great Lantern, with its coffee shops, was boring compared to this. When they came to the ten-storeyed restaurant Pi Boon paid off the taxi—he was a skilful bargainer—and they entered a very small room which moved upwards so suddenly that Kim Huat's stomach seemed to turn inside. He was afraid, for he had never been in a lift before.

In the restaurant they sat at wicker tables and watched a bevy of dancing girls—Louk-Chines—who were singing "Sunnyside Up," their mobile hips swaying to the rhythm of the music. Kim Huat was fascinated by the tawdry ornamentation round their waists, their powdered cheeks and little rose-red mouths.

Pi Boon ordered beer and ice. He was a natural inhabitant of this world of light and laughter, a sophisticated, enviable soul. Kim Huat gazed at him in admiration. He listened to him declaiming his views about the dancing girls, whom he surveyed with the air of a connoisseur. What did Kim Huat think of the girl third from the left?

It was then that an incident took place which puzzled and alarmed Kim Huat. He had glanced appraisingly at the third girl from the left when from the corner of his eye, he saw Pi Boon making a secretive sign to Ah Kien. A little later the same thing occurred, but this time it was the hollow-cheeked old man who had caught Pi Boon's attention. Kim Huat began to be thoroughly afraid. His doubts about Ah Kien came back in full force.

He recalled an old Cantonese proverb about silent men being evil-doers. And why, he asked himself, was Ah Kien dressed in black? Stifling his fears, he tried to concentrate on the dancing girls again—the third from the left...

"If you were a rich man you could come here often; you could enjoy yourself, Kim Huat."

It was Pi Boon's voice, suave and significant. Kim Huat gave a frightened, artificial laugh.

"That is a fair dream," he answered.

"It is no dream," said Pi Boon, "you may be rich, friend."

"How so?"

"Listen carefully. Ah Kien here, he has no money."

Kim Huat saw Ah Kien lean forward eagerly. His eyes now sparkled vivaciously; his lips were moist.

"But he has a house. It is a good house, situated in a good lane. He is poor now. Next month he will be rich. He will have a prosperous New Year."

"He will sell his house?" inquired Kim Huat in grave bewilderment.

Pi Boon laughed and stroked his stomach.

"No, friend: nevertheless, he will be rich."

"How so?"

"He has insured his house, haven't you, Kien?"

The old man nodded animatedly.

"The premium is paid. I am content."

His voice was tremulously thin.

"He will be rich."

"I do not understand," said Kim Huat.

"Poor rustic!" Pi Boon was laughing. "Do you not understand, friend, that the house will be burnt? Money will rise from the ashes. Ah Kien will be rich."

Kim Huat began to understand.

"But who will burn the house?" he asked.

"Ah!"

Pi Boon glanced at Ah Kien, but the old man's gaze was turned away towards the dancing girls. Pi Boon surveyed the troupe again.

"Pink Lotus—the third from the left—you like her, Kim Huat?"

"She takes my fancy."

"You could buy her for a hundred baht."

Kim Huat sighed.

"I do not earn so much in half a year."

Then Pi Boon leaned forward; his manner was earnestly confidential.

"If you burn Ah Kien's house, he will give you two hundred baht. It is a fortune..."

Confusion came over Kim Huat. Now he understood fully. They wanted him to be the firebug. Two hundred baht—it was a lot of money. He thought of the things he could do with the cash. He could visit his family, buy a share in a market garden, wear different garments every day—garments of flowered Chefoo silk. He could buy Pink Lotus...

He watched her pirouetting to the weird "farang" music, which set his brain on fire. The curved grace of her instep! Her exquisite arms, her brown-irised eyes...

Pi Boon was speaking.

"It will be easy. Ah Kien will give you the kerosene to hide in your rickshaw. There will be no danger. What do you say?"

Kim Huat was not without business instincts.

"It is very risky," he muttered. "I am no coward. I fear not the flames, but the police—two hundred baht—it is little reward."

Ah Kien turned round in bird-like agitation.

"Buddha! but I supply the Kerosene," he cried indignantly.

Kim Huat ignored him. Addressing Pi Boon he began to press his point with oratorical skill.

"Two hundred is too small. The fates are not sure. These Siamese police—they are small men, but they are cunning. I am a family man. If I were caught..."

Pi Boon conferred with Ah Kien.

"It is settled," he then announced decisively. "Ah Kien will give you two hundred and twenty-five baht. Not one satang more. Rickshaw coolies are as common as lice in this city. If you do not accept, we can easily find another."

"Where is the money?"

"You will burn the house to-morrow night. Next day Ah Kien will give you one note to the Ah Foo Bank. He will show you his poll-tax receipt."

The old man drew forth this document, which Kim Huat perused carefully.

Everything was in order. He was satisfied that Ah Kien was no bad character, but an honest

house owner in need for some cash for the New Year festival.

"I will burn the house," he said.

They left the restaurant and hired a car.

*

*

*

THE three of them were greatly excited. They spoke in nervous whispers lest the driver might overhear their plans. They were approaching the lane where Ah Kien's house stood. Pi Boon told Kim Huat to glance quickly at the building as they passed; to show as little interest in it as possible. It was the house next to the coffee shop.

To-morrow morning Ah Kien would expel the tenant for not paying the rent. In the afternoon he would bring tins of kerosene and soaked rags to Kim Huat's sampan, for Kim Huat to conceal in his rickshaw. At seven o'clock Kim Huat should go into the city, and at eleven o'clock he must enter the house with the tins. The street would be dark then; no one would notice him. The lighting of the kerosene would be a simple matter—there was no danger at all. He would have plenty of time to escape before the alarm was given. He must not forget to bring the empty tins away with him. They would wait for him at the ten-storeyed restaurant. It was safer that Ah Kien should remain at a distance from his premises.

The car turned into a narrow lane of ill-built wooden dwellings. Kim Huat's excitement developed into a frenzy. The house next to the coffee shop—he must remember that. The pulses were throbbing like drums in his ears; the moisture

from his brow trickled into his eyes, obstructing his vision.

They were passing the house. The car was going too quickly to allow him anything but a dim and hurried glimpse. There was a white-haired old man seated in the doorway. That would be the tenant Ah Kien was to expel. The house next to the coffee shop.

Everything was satisfactorily arranged. They drove out to Kim Huat's domicile in the suburbs and bade him farewell. It was a bewildered Kim Huat who at last settled down beneath his blanket. For an hour he ruminated on the strange experience he had had.

*

*

*

MIDNIGHT was striking when Kim Huat arrived at the ten-storeyed restaurant on the following night. He found Pi Boon and Ah Kien awaiting him expectantly. They ordered for him a plate of bird's-nest soup and a coloured ice. Then he made his report. He had been very successful. The street being almost empty, he had no difficulty in entering the house with the tins of kerosene. He had soaked the floor and walls thoroughly, and the blaze which followed was indeed satisfactory.

Ah Kien's eyes glittered.

"That is good," he said.

"An abundant fire thrilleth the heart," added Pi Boon sagely.

"One thing only I could not understand," continued Kim Huat, sipping his soup. "Why did you not expel your tenant as you promised?"

Pi Boon looked surprised.

"Ah Kien expelled his tenant this morning."

"But he was there," said Kim Huat, "he ran up to me as I left the house. I was carrying the empty tins. I pushed him away."

"What's this?" Ah Kien exclaimed sharply. "I turned out my tenant this morning. She left quietly."

Kim Huat threw down his wooden spoon. "She! ...but the white-haired man?"

"Ah Kien's tenant was an old woman," Pi Boon shouted.

"Tchh!" cried Ah Kien. "This is impossible."

"We will go quickly," said Pi Boon.

They rose hurriedly and left the restaurant. When they reached the alley in which Ah Kien's house stood they found it densely crowded. In the distance, above the heads of the chattering throng, they could see clouds of dark smoke trailing across the roofs. Two fire-engines stood at the corner. Stealthily Pi Boon led the way through the jostling mass of inquisitive humanity, keeping a wary eye on the groups of diminutive khaki-clad Siamese police-men. Sometimes a big, pot-bellied countryman obstructed his way until Pi Boon boomed at him angrily, pointing to Ah Kien the bereaved house owner.

They made slow progress through the crowd, until at last Kim Huat could see the fruit of his labours. The house was a charred mass of debris; the top floor was gone; the roof had fallen in. There was a cauldron of flame visible. He had

done his work well.

But his self-satisfaction was rudely interrupted by a simultaneous outburst from his fellow-conspirators.

"Buddha!" moaned Ah Kien, supporting himself by clinging to Pi Boon's sleeve.

"Son of a pig!" snarled Pi Boon. "It is the wrong house."

"It is next the coffee shop," protested Kim Huat with a frantic gesture.

"Rat-faced ogre!" shrieked Pi Boon at him. "That is Ah Kien's house," and he pointed to the house which stood completely unharmed, two doors away.

The fact that both houses were next to the coffee shop did not lessen Pi Boon's fury. Then Ah Kien recovered from his shock. He spat lustily upon Kim Huat and loaded him with expletives which were representative of the rarest obscenities. The crowd around them began to lose interest in the action of the fire-engines. This was a good quarrel; the old man with the hollow cheeks was as amusing as a clown in a "lakon," and the furious fat man was a rare specimen.

But Pi Boon, quickly curbed his anger. Observing the approach of a Siamese policeman, he led Ah Kien away in a subdued mood. Deftly, they hid themselves in the excited throng.

Kim Huat, left by himself, gradually realized the immensity of his mistake. He had burned down a stranger's house; the consequences would be terrible if the police found him. Thoughts of

prison loomed large in his imagination. What would happen to his family, to his rickshaw and his comfortable sampan? And Ah Kien had spat upon him and humiliated him. How he hated that hollow-cheeked old man! How terrible was the fury of Pi Boon!

Kim Huat shivered. A great unhappiness came over him. He stood there undecided in the seething mass, gazing blankly at his countrymen's sweat-rimmed faces. Then his brain cleared, and he saw that the fire was completely under control; people were moving away disappointedly now that the flames were extinguished. Kim Huat wiped the smuts from his eyes. He felt like laughing when he realized that he was the originator of all this excitement. There was a secret delight in the fact. He remembered experiencing a similar sensation years ago, when his mother-in-law had slipped on the steps he had greased. Suddenly all the delight went out of his body. Beside him, eyeing him quietly, stood the white-haired old man who had accosted him as he was leaving the house with the empty kerosene tins, the same whom he had seen seated in the doorway on the previous day. A pang of terror chilled his spine. This was the house owner. Not far away he saw two Siamese policeman.

The white-haired old man was speaking. "It is most satisfactory. They will pay the insurance money before New Year. You have concealed the tins carefully?"

Kim Huat stammered a dazed affirmative.

"I will reward you fairly," he whispered the other delightedly.

"Let us go for some chow."

They moved away together towards the Sampeng.



V. MONSOON

FROM his dressing-room the Resident could see the storm-clouds rolling up across the undulating sweep of jungle-clad countryside. The seasonal squalls were hourly growing more vigorous in their embraces. In the Residency compound the tall cork trees bent forward whimsically—like females curtsying at a *fin de siècle* reception.

As he shaved himself, the Resident hummed automatically and boisterously a few bars from his stock tune, "O Sole Mio." He felt in good form that morning; the turbulent monsoonal atmosphere strangely enlivened his normally prosaic trend of morning thought.

Looking at his reflection in the hand-mirror, he prided himself on his well-preserved appearance. His pink, unwrinkled cheeks belied his fifty-five years. True, there was a streak of grey at his temples—he really must try that Yogi exercise which Colonel Gascoigne had been telling him of at the club the other night and stand on his head for six minutes every morning. There possibly was something in the method, since it was credited with having turned Gascoigne's grey hair a glossy black again.

*

*

*

THE strains of Italian fervour ceased abruptly for the Resident has cut his chin—a most unusual

occurrence. Bad-temperedly he shouted for his bearer to bring him some cotton-wool—"Jaldi ! Jaldi !" It was the first time he had cut himself for several years. His hand, he noticed, was unduly shaky—the monsoon, like the English spring, was disturbing to the system. The excitement of the season, however, was pleasantly exhilarating.

Ten minutes later, the wound successfully staunched, the Resident descended to the dining-room, where his new secretary and housekeeper, Miss Wolsey, was preparing the coffee.

Miss Wolsey was twenty-five, a Rosetti-ish creation with a figure which reminded one of trees in spring, and frequently distracted the Resident's attention from the perusal of important office correspondence. Adventurously, three months before, she had answered the Resident's advertisement in a Bombay newspaper for a secretary-housekeeper.

Her typing and shorthand, and her filing system, turned out to be extremely efficient and the Residency clerks soon came to regard her as a mem-saheb out of the ordinary. Her housekeeping had been correspondingly adequate ; once or twice the Resident had paused to wonder whether Miss Wolsey's very palatable menus, rather than the refreshing monsoon, had been the cause of his recent sense of well-being.

A housekeeper aged 25 was an innovation at the Residency. The two previous bachelor Residents had brought elderly sisters to perform the necessary

domestic duties, and the Resident was aware that certain of the Station *Hauksbees* found pleasure in looking askance at his choice. An autumnal female with the required homeliness, or a distressed Anglo-Indian gentlewoman, would have been their selection.

Mild unconventionality, however, had always been the Resident's strong point, and his social preeminence as supreme "burra saheb" was too strong to be affected by the local circumscribed tattle.

Morally, he realised, he was akin to Caesar's wife.

Miss Wolsey smiled charmingly in response to his monsoonal good-morning. The delightful fragrance of the coffee which she handed to him floated tantalisingly before his receptive nostrils. A little patronisingly he glanced towards the side-board at the two immaculately sashed and be-turbaned Residency servants.

All was certainly right with the world as the Resident consumed his bacon and eggs. Miss Wolsey, he decided, was looking particularly lovely that morning. Her auburn hair, her dimples, the soft friendly cadence of her voice—all combined to add to his over-flowing *joie-de-vivre*.

"The monsoon has come in earnest," he heard her saying, as she passed him the marmalade.

"The best time of the year, Miss Wolsey," he answered. "As Colonel Gascoigne says, it gets into one's blood."

Miss Wolsey laughed. She spent a good deal of

time in avoiding Colonel Gascoigne, who was a skittish widower and the Club Bore.

It was then that the Resident began to steel himself for the matter in hand, a business he had thrashed out insomniacally under the mosquito net in the small hours of that morning. He had decided to propose marriage to Miss Wolsey.

* * *

METICULOUSLY he had considered the pros and cons of the situation. He guessed that the girl's mother and brother would relish the prospect of her becoming the wife of a wealthy Resident with a knighthood in the offing. The social status, he imagined, was sufficient bait in itself. And he was the most presentable bachelor in the Station—neat of figure, agile, sprucely clad, a sportsman.

His age, he told himself appraisingly, might be taken for a sound 40 ; his virility was the outcome of a rigidly temperate mode of life. His success in the Indian Civil Service had been the result of thirty-five years of conscientious work—he had little doubt that Miss Wolsey, who had always been very friendly in her attitude to him, would accept his proposal with an appropriate maidenly coyness.

He chuckled to think how his fellow-official, Colonel Gascoigne, would envy him ! Occasionally he had noticed the old chap amorously patting Miss Wolsey's shoulder after tennis at the club. It was, the Resident considered, impertinence for an old campaigner like Gascoigne to act so skittishly. His publican's stomach and his Bacchus-

veined nose had not permit of such behaviour.

Folding his napkin, the Resident cleared his throat. Miss Wolsey—or Ruby, as he would call her—was smiling encouragingly at him. He had carefully rehearsed the scene and confidence was not lacking.

Then a peon appeared and announced suavely that Wolsey memsaheb was wanted on the office telephone.

* * * *

WHEN she had left the room, the Resident cursed the uncomprehending peon. He was not accustomed to unlooked-for interruptions in his official, rather cremitic existence, and it was doubly disconcerting when the disturbance occurred at such a crucial moment.

Growing clamer, he lit a cigarette and strolled out on to the verandah. A full view of the countryside presented itself to his absent-minded gaze. Low-lying formations of cloud, full-bellied with rain and saturninely impressive, were moving up the valley, as flocks fresh to pasture. A vivid flash of lightning awakened him from his reverie.

“The monsoon gets into one’s blood,” old Gascoigne had said. The Resident smiled. He would propose to Miss Wolsey in the drawing-room among the soft cushions on the sofa, a more fitting venue than over the breakfast table which, now that he came to think of it, was not particularly suitable setting for the occasion.

The girl was a long time at the ’phone, and her absence caused a cloud to darken the Resident’s

thoughts. Instinctively he knew that Lieutenant Greenlay was on the other end of the line. A conceited young whelp, Greenlay had been acting temporarily in the secretariat. It was not the first time that he had rung up Miss Wolsey.

An almost green glint animated the Resident's eyes as he moved down the verandah towards the office where the protracted 'phone conversation was being held. It was not his intention to eavesdrop—he had never done such a thing in his life. Even as a wayward public school embryo, listening at keyholes had been anathema to him.

A melancholy gust of wind eddied through the verandah, exhausted itself in the adjacent coppice of tamarinds. Suddenly the Resident heard Ruby's voice, and her laughter, mellifluent and heart-warming. A stray phrase or two reached his ears.

"Tennis on Tuesday...A moonlight picnic. How ripping!——"

He had no wish to overhear the conversation—of course it was Greenlay, that conceited pup, speaking to her. A great hate suffused the Resident's countenance. The image of Greenlay, young, handsome and self-assured, hovered antagonisingly before his vision.

Then the errant wind subsided completely and he could hear Ruby's voice in its full clarity.

"Hold on. I'll ask the old man——."

* * *

Miss Wolsey found the Resident seated on the couch in the drawing-room. He was reading the newspaper with his normal placidity. A cigarette

hung limply from his lips. She spoke casually.

"Lieutenant Greenlay is on the 'phone, sir."

"Anything urgent?"

"He wants to know if he can bring round the army statistics this afternoon."

The Resident, wrinkling his brow, considered the question with slow deliberation.

"This afternoon. Ah, yes. You might inform Lieutenant Greenlay that I shall be occupied then. Tell him, my dear Miss Wolsey, that the old man will be taking his siesta——"



VI. TRAGEDY IN RANGOON

MA BA YIN was troubled. A respectable Burmese lady in late middle age, she had led a happy married life, her husband, Syn Ba, being a retired stockbroker much respected by the financial string-pullers of Mogul Street. He had always provided for her well—an ornate house in the most fashionable Rangoon suburb, a bungalow at Maymyo, a stream-lined American car, silks and satins in abundance, the finest cigars—certainly Syn Ba had carried out his duties satisfactorily. Recently, however, she was appreciably worried by the change which had come over him. She had discussed the matter with her daughter, the wife of a prosperous government official, and with her son (of whom she was very proud, for he was a twice-failed B.A.) but neither of them could find a solution of their father's trouble. Syn Ba's symptoms were many and strange. Once so gay and loquacious, he had grown abnormally reticent and steely-eyed. His replies to his wife's solicitous enquiries became mere grunts fraught with surliness. Nothing roused him any longer, not even the sight of the most appetising curry and rice, nor the presence of mangosteens, his favourite fruit. He was inhumanly inactive—Ma Ba Yin sometimes thought—and she feared he was becoming a subject of sleeping sickness.

His tears were another most disturbing factor. To see his eyes so full of inexplicable grief was not only worrying but aggravating.

Once Ma Ba Yin had told him summarily that he must visit the oculist-sahib who had so miraculously cured her uncle's double cataract. But Syn Ba adamantly refused to stir. He seemed in no way disturbed by the unpleasantness of his ailment. He merely became more sluggish, never went anywhere and lost all interest in his stock-broker friends. The fluctuations in Steel shares no longer caused a flutter in his heart.

Undoubtedly there was something most seriously wrong with Syn Ba.

* * *

At last one morning Ma Ba Yin in desperation went to her counsellor, a very wise and learned bonze at the Shwe Dagon. She poured forth her worries to this saffron-robed old man who listened silently and sympathetically to every detail which came from her agitated lips.

"Wise and Holy One," Ma Ba Yin cried hystreically, "My man has been a good and faithful husband. He has never strayed in fifty years, for I am a watchful woman. No dancing girl has come into his life, for I have been vigilant as a wall-lizard. And now in his old age this strange calamity has descended upon him. I have called upon the Lord Buddha for many days to free him from his—his madness."

The eyes of the old man grew narrow with wisdom.

"Good and Estimable woman, art thou convinced of this madness? Hast thou attempted to divert they man's mind in any way?"

"Wise and Holy One," replied Ma Ba Yin, "I take constant pains to distract his attention daily. I wear my loveliest lungyis for his pleasure. I place the *Burmese Investors Gazette* on his breakfast table. I cause my eyes to sparkle like the stars and my hair to shine like blue velvet. And at Chinese New Year I took him to the Zoological Gardens."

The wrinkled forehead of the old bonze lifted imperceptibly with a new interest.

"Good and Estimable Woman, during this visit to the Zoological Gardens, did your worthy Syn Ba cast off his lethargy in some degree?"

"Yea, My Teacher, he seemed momentarily to be distracted and animated and even showed a genuine interest in some of the exhibits."

"In what exhibit did he display especial interest, Good Woman?"

"At the Tank of the Crocodiles, for instance."

The old man's eyes grew deep with knowledge. He signed heavily and called to his *chela* to prepare a chew of betel. He stared at Ma Ba Yin long and piercingly before he next spoke.

"Think hard, Good Woman, and answer my questions with accuracy. Did you and Syn Ba spend any time at the pool of the great female *mugger* who is reputed to be close on one hundred years of age? Her mate, if I am not mistaken, is also in the pool."

"Yea, O Wise One, it was there that Syn Ba seemed most to forget himself and to show a genuine interest in the reptile. Now that I remember it, I had some difficulty in getting him away from the pool."

"Exactly," crooned the old bonze. "But what is more important is this. Can you tell me whether the *mugger* reciprocated your husband's interest? Think carefully, Estimable Woman."

Ma Ba Yin, considerably puzzled by the old man's question, was at a loss for a moment. Then her countenance brightened.

"Now that I come to think of it, O Wise One, the aged *mugger* did seem to be inordinately excited by Syn Ba's stare, for a small white boy with an ayah said to me at the time 'The old girl seems to like your hubby,' which I thought a rude and uncalled-for remark. I remember that the *mugger's* eyes followed us around in a most alarming manner. The onlookers noticed it too. And the aged one's mate was full of ire."

"Very significant," decreed the bonze nodding sagely and straightening his robes with precision.

"Well, my Good Woman, I think I can diagnose this case correctly. But I must warn you that a quality of—let us call it—stoicism, will be required on your part. For the ailment of your man, Syn Ba, is not curable. His tears, for example, are an infallible symptom."

The eyes of Ma Ba Yin were dark with fear.

"Tell me the worst, Wise Teacher," she exclaimed frenziedly.

"A complicated case of reversion, Good Woman," announced the bonze calmly. "Your husband obviously sheds crocodile tears. He was a crocodile—presumably wedded to the aged specimen at the Zoo—in his past existence, and into a crocodile he is ostensibly returning. You will, no doubt, soon be aware of the development of horny epidermal scales on his skin——"

With a shriek Ma Ba Yin fainted.

* * *

WHEN she returned home in great agitation she immediately made for her husband's apartments. She had sent telegrams to her son and daughter. ("Father a crocodile. Come quickly.")

She was vastly troubled; the metamorphosis had so many attendant difficulties. What would they feed father on? Would his habits become aquatic? Now that she came to think of it, Syn Ba *had* been using the bathroom very frequently of late. Should she report the matter to the police?

When she opened the door of Syn Ba's private sanctum she was surprised to find him absent. He was usually to be found sprawling lethargically on the divan.

"Where's the master?" she asked a servant wildly.

"He said he was going to the Zoo, madam."

"To the Zoo!" cried Ma Bin Yin raucously.

"Order the car at once."

Alas! by the time the estimable lady arrived at the Gardens the place was filled with reporters and

a surging crowd blocked the way to the pool of the aged crocodile and her mate. Ma Ba Yin caught hold of a policeman roughly.

"What's happened? Tell me quick."

"Elderly gentleman devoured by the Croc's mate," replied the constable blandly.

"Holy Smoke!" cried Ma Ba Yin, collapsing in his arms.



VII. PHOEBE AND MORTIMER

WHEN Phoebe awakened, the initial traces of sunrise were spreading in a reddening curtain across the horizon. The sun itself hung heavily, a golden disc becoming prominent at the edge of the cotton fields. The leaves of the large banyan tree which stood sentinel beside Phoebe's home were crystalline with the dew of a December morning in Gujerat. At that early hour everything had the rich quality of velvet.

Soon she was aware of the compound birds awaking, invigorated from sleep and eager to greet another day—the mynahs, sedate of plume and a little arrogant, the bulbuls amiable and fussy, the dark-hooded crows vulgar and rapacious. The latter fascinated her. She was convinced that a grim quality of evil shone from their beady, ever-watchful eyes.

She averted her gaze and found herself looking at Mortimer, dispassionately, as he lay beside her. It was her matutinal custom to survey him thus, with dormant affection and domestic calm. Latterly he had shown signs of becoming greyer ; in the cold winter sunlight his aspect was sometimes almost white. She was not altogether satisfied about Mortimer's health. She knew that the harsh cold nights followed by the hot noons of the plains were undermining his constitution. He

was yet outwardly rotund, but the prime of life had obviously gone from him. She cast her glance over his broad back and remembered that it was one of the first things about him which had attracted her. He had always pleased her physically. As a life mate she had found him eminently satisfactory. Considerate and kind in material matters, he invariably insisted that she should have her place in the sunshine of the world. Their early days together had been a dream of happiness.

She turned round and gazed towards the garden. The sun was bursting forth in an opaline haze and the colours of the hibiscus and the bougainvillea were already stabbing the morning with their riotous glory. It was a pretty garden and people often said she must feel proud to be surrounded by such a wealth of floral beauty. A low-cropped hedge of plumbago encircled the pond with an entrancing blue loveliness. The pond—an artificial globe-shaped affair—was full of water. It was pleasant to sit there on the rim at midday and to sun oneself and ruminate vaguely about life in general and about Mortimer in particular—the axis of her existence.

The water was very clear at midday. It formed a warm, pellucid azure, in contrast to its chilly greyness in the early mornings. The larvac and the insect life on the surface were a source of constant interest to Phoebe. She was never happier than on those sun-warmed December forenoons. The land of Gujerat was glorious then, a fit place for kings and proud queens.

Bevies of gaily-clad young girls, twittering like sparrows, were now passing along beyond the hedge with swinging hips, bearing on their sari-screened heads martlets of cool well water.

Now a kingfisher had alighted by the edge of the pond—a beautiful bird with all the colours of the rainbow for his sheen. It was his custom to come tamely to the pedestal each morning during the winter months. There he insouciantly preened himself and paid a little attention to Mortimer and herself as if they had been creatures of stone. No wonder the missionary's wife from the adjacent bungalow went into raptures at sight of the bird, for the kingfisher was superb, and she could make allowance for his vanity.

Phoebe liked the missionary's wife. She was full-bosomed and kindly, a gentle type, very different from the wife of the Government Surgeon who lived in the big house at the far side of the compound. Phoebe could never imagine the Government Surgeon's wife showing any appreciation of nature or of the animal world. She was a rough and ready person, raucous-voiced and rather forbidding in appearance. Phoebe had never liked her; she was even a little afraid of her. But the missionary's wife was different. Even Mortimer, who was inclined to fight shy of the attention of most women, felt himself completely at ease in her presence. Ever since they had first arrived in Gujerat—a raw young couple from Bombay—the missionary's wife had been good to them. Latterly she had shown great sympathy with Mortimer over

his *malaise*. She thought he was inclined to be cold-blooded and needed greater warmth. He should sit in the sun, she advised. Very frequently she brought them both dainty tit-bits and in every way demonstrated her benevolence of character. It was a compliment to the missionary's wife that Mortimer should feel no sense of shyness at her approach, for without any doubt Mortimer suffered from an extreme reticence. It was really difficult to get him to come out of his shell.

She turned and surveyed him again. He was still asleep. She could see the curve of his neck—it always seemed ridiculous to her that Mortimer should have so small a neck in proportion to the bulk of his body. It was an unorthodox, slightly serpentine apex to his rotund figure. Something then distracted Phoebe's attention. Out of the corner of her eye she was aware of an object moving towards her. It was the Siamese cat from the Government surgeon's compound. She was distrustful of felines. One never knew what they would do next. This was, however, a handsome animal. Phoebe could seldom keep her eyes off her as she sat on the rim of the pond. Often she had gazed back almost hypnotised into the creature's inscrutable eyes. There were fish in the pond—little arrows of gold which darted skilfully near the surface of the water, their gills moving imperceptibly in the blue. Once she had seen the cat—its sensitive seal-coloured ears pricked up—put out its paw—but the goldfish were beyond reach. Such bafflement had been too much for

the animal. The almond-shaped eyes blazed with anger, the badly kinked tail lashed the ground furiously——

The scents of the morning were already diffusing themselves more strongly in the clarifying air—jasmine and woodsmoke and the strong healthy smell of the bullocks pulling the wagons to market. Very far overhead, Phoebe could see a Brahminy kite hovering in the clear sky. She wondered idly what sensations a great bird like that would have, so diametrically opposite to those of her own mundane existence.

Next she saw the *mali* moving down the garden path with some cuttings in his hand. He was a stalwart Moslem, earnest in his work, but he had the deplorable habit of frequently spitting his chew of pan into the pond, thereby fouling the water with its acrid juice. In other ways the man was inoffensive, unlike the *bhisti*, an aggressive Pathan, whose chief characteristic was an incurable tendency to sloth. On several occasions he had omitted to replenish the supply of water in the pond and the goldfish had almost died.

Mortimer had not stirred as yet. It was unnatural, Phoebe decided, for him to be so somnolent in the mornings. She could not account for his sluggishness. It was not as if he had been a *gourmand* about his food. Gazing steadily at him she made a slight movement which might have been interpreted as a sigh. Poor Mortimer! She was afraid that all the signs of a premature old age were upon him—that increasing greyness, and that untoward

scaly appearance of his skin. A cold spell never suited Mortimer.

Her thoughts were suddenly distracted by the sound of voices nearby. She turned round to see the bright dresses of two women beyond the plum-bago hedge. The missionary's wife and the Government Surgeon's lady were approaching. The latter's strident voice filled the air harshly. The placidity of the morning was broken by its discordance. In contrast the missionary's wife had a voice which was as quietly mellifluous as a mango leaf falling to ground in the June moonlight.

"Come and see them" the missionary's wife was saying, "I'm afraid Mortimer is ailing."

They were standing beside the pond now.

"Do you know anything about them?"

"Nothing at all, except an indecent limerick which Archie told me in bed the other night." The Government Surgeon's wife was speaking, her words being punctuated by loud guffaws.

"They're such funny things—turtles! They make me laugh. So very listless and armoured-plated. I think they must lead very platonic lives. How could a turtle ever be amorous?"

"But Phoebe laid an egg last year," said the missionary's wife, a trifle indignantly.

"Mortimer's looking very sorry for himself. Why is he so white and scaly? Why doesn't he move? Lend me your stick."

"Be very careful, my dear. They're delicate creatures. We brought them up from Bombay two years ago. They thrive in the monsoon, but this

cold spell has made them lethargic, especially Mortimer."

The Government Surgeon's wife became very excited.

"Why isn't he moving?" she cried. "Look, I'm prodding him hard with the stick. If you ask my opinion, Mortimer is dead—dead as a doornail!"

She gave her verdict with triumphant relish. There was a deep silence. The missionary's wife was leaning over the proud. The voice came calmly and sadly.

"I think you're right. Poor Mortimer! We had a great affection for the two of them. And they were useful. They kept the mosquitos away. The cold has killed him. He hasn't had the energy to sun himself lately. I don't know how Phoebe will get along as a widow."

The Government Surgeon's wife was laughing uproariously.

"Maybe she'll commit *suttee*!" she screamed.

They went away. Phoebe lay very quiet, her eyes fixed on the white, immobile form of Mortimer. The prodding of that woman's stick had turned her mate towards her. She could see a filmy veil about Mortimer's eyes and his funny little neck was smaller and quainter than usual. Cautiously he went towards his wizened features, smelling his scales. Then, in intense disgust, she moved away to the far corner of the pond. The kingfisher alighted again on the rim and commenced to preen himself industriously. Far above, in the cobalt sky, the Brahminy kite was still hovering restlessly.

VIII. ANNAMITE BOY

THE boat was entering the unsettled China Sea. The wide Saigon river—and its border of pale emerald rice-fields and shadowy mangroves—was receding from sight, wrapt in a mauve silence. In solitude a long-necked Chinese pagoda reared itself inquisitively from the foliage on the river bank. Very soon the moon rose; the sea became a mirror of silver. The shore and the far-off spine of landscape stood out a metallic grey against the starlit sky. For'ard, over the horizon, an aggressive mass of stormcloud sent forth vivid flashes of heat lightning.

On the boat preparations were being made for the night. The Javanese crew were already settling down to rest. Faces upturned to the moonlight, feet crossed at the ankles, they slept gracefully, healthily weary after a week's unloading of cargo.

On the bridge stood the Captain and the Chief Officer—keen-eyed, portly Hollanders. Behind them, at the wheel, crouched a barefoot Malay quartermaster. Each movement of the officers he followed carefully. His nimble, sepia-skinned hands responded with instant swiftness to every word of command. His picturesque *ko-plo* was tilted low above his brow to restraint a jet-black fringe of hair from obstructing his vision.

The night was very quiet. There was no sound but the throbbing of the screw and the monotonous sibilance of the waves.

One figure alone stood out in silhouette at the stern of the ship—the Chief Officer's Annamite "boy." He had been standing there motionless against the rail for an hour. He had watched his native land disappear from sight in a dark serpentine shape upon the skyline.

His name was Prai-Yat. He wore a pair of spotless white trousers and a long black tunic. Pensively he continued to stand there statue-like, his gaze resting on the silvered iridescence of the ship's wake. Essentially a dreamer, he was untouched by such beauty. He was thinking of that "little Paris"—Saigon—and its infinite allurements. A medley of visions filled his brain—the luxury of the jewellers' shops in the Rue Catinat, the grandiloquent motor-cars, the chic, carmine-lipped Frenchwomen seated at the marble-topped tables outside the cafés, the richly-clad mandarins, the sensuous Annamite music, the multi-coloured lights of the coffee-shops at Cholon, the lithe rickshaw-men pulling their silver-tongued countrywomen to a secret rendezvous....

In his imagination Prai-Yat was back in the midst of the city's delights. He succeeded completely in erasing from his mind the fact that he was the personal cabin "boy" of Mynheer Van Kuylers, Chief Officer on the *Van Huis*, a tramp steamer bound as trade winds demanded for the Celebes and a score of copra-offering islets in the Indies.

His thoughts soon returned to earth. Money, he mused dolefully, was needed to enjoy the luxuries which Saigon offered, and the Annamate "boy" considered that a ten-piastre note contained more dreams than any poet's soul.

Money...had his parents been other than illiterate, unambitious rice-farmers on the Cambodian plain, the life of servitude which he led on board the *Van Huis* might have been obviated. A small patrimony would have entailed freedom. As it was, their gross poverty was all-shackling. Had they been townspeople they might have learnt a trade from their industrious Chinese cousins...

Prai-Yat's olive-brown eyes grew troubled. He could see no paradise in the future.

Mynheer Van Kuylers, the first officer, was a good master. A heavy, apoplectic type, his rubicund features were seldom vexed by the wrath common to the other officers. A great beer-drinker, his occasional displeasure found expression in the loud shouting of the word "Boy!" But he was, on the whole, a tranquil, good-tempered man. Prai-Yat respected him, as far as he could bring himself to respect any Occidental, and Van Kuylers at the end of each trip tipped him satisfactorily for his personal services—the sharpening of the Mynheer's razor, the procuring of a plate of *rysttafel* at the conclusion of a watch in the early hours, or the polishing of a gilt epaulet.

Leaning over the stern rail, Prai-Yat sighed. His dream of the pleasures of the big city he relegated to the back of his mind. Another time

he would summon them forth and enjoy them as a squirrel enjoys its hidden hoard. Now he was surrounded by moonlight and grim reality.

The Captain and the Chief Officer had left the bridge. He could see them in the smoking-room, gossiping over their *schnaps*.

It was late. He would have to prepare the Mynheer's cabin, for Van Kuyler's watch began at 4 a.m., and he would be retiring to rest when the night-cap was consumed. Stepping warily between the rows of sleeping Javanese sailors, Prai-Yat went forward to his task. He was a little sleepy, a little lazy. Life was very difficult for a moneyless Annamite "boy."

* * *

THE cheap alarm-clock registered 4 a.m. The Annamite "boy" rose from his bunk after a fitful sleep. The clock was ten minutes fast. He had to awaken his master, bring him a drink prior to his duties on the bridge. Rubbing his eyes, Prai-Yat signed mournfully. Interrupted sleep was the bane of his existence. Angrily he thrust aside the dark form of the ship's cat, purring at his legs.

He went on deck. No life stirred on board the vessel. A starlit sky, the throbbing of the ship's screw, the silver span of sea, illimitable and a little frightening. . . The immensity of Nature and its intense loneliness increased the Annamite's discontent.

Eight bells rang out from the foredeck. He hurried to the Chief Officer's cabin. Knocking gently, he pushed open the door and automatically

switched on the light, as he had done for so many voyages within the last two years. His manner might have been that of a somnambulist. Dutifully he went forward to rouse his master, to stir the bedclothes gently.

But his outstretched hands never reached the blanket. His whole body became rigid. In terror he gazed at Mynheer Van Kuyler's form. His master's countenance, illuminated harshly in the greenish glare of the lamp, was no longer rubicund. It was pallid and strangely quiet. The Chief Officer was lying on his back in an unnatural position. His obese body was a little mountain in the bunk. His eyes were wide open and glazed like those of a sick bird. Prai-Yat, losing his initial fear, moved forward cautiously and touched the Officer's cheek. It was cold.

Mynheer Van Kuylers was dead. The Annamite "boy" stood there staring at that intensely white countenance, his sight a little mesmerized by the mystery of death. Like all his race, he was abnormally superstitious; the appeasing of a multitude of evil spirits was part of his day's routine. But this was a new experience. Being alone in the presence of a dead white man was an occurrence he had never dreamt of in his extremely dream-haunted philosophy. Gradually his fears decreased and curiosity took their place.

It was then that he became aware of the Officer's stiff left hand lying across the sheet at the edge of the bunk. On the third finger was a large gold signet ring; round the flabby wrist hung a gold

watch. In the past two years the Annamite "boy" had often found his eyes resting covetously on both the watch and the ring. Enviously, he had more than once calculated their value. He knew that, if pawned in Saigon or Bangkok, the watch alone would bring in sufficient cash for a year's gay living...

As he stood in the unnatural atmosphere of the cabin, temptation and caution assailed him in resurgent waves. If he stole the watch and the ring from the Mynheer's dead body, there was every possibility of the theft being found out. Did not some of these "red-haired devils" have the gold extracted from their teeth after death? The Mynheer's relatives, he knew, were all in a foreign land, but the Captain and the officers would certainly be responsible for his belongings. A watch, a ring—gold!—these were conspicuous personal effects. On the other hand, a year of luxury in Saigon—music and dancing girls and tunics of rich silk—that was a possible paradise not easy to ignore. It was not that he had any religious scruples. Temptation was merely an act of the invisible spirit world; failure to resist it—a decree of Providence. A well-developed sense of caution was the disturbing element.

Suddenly his difficulties were solved. He had forgotten the Mynheer's jade charm. This hung from a gold chain amid the hairs on the dead man's chest. With ill-suppressed excitement the Annamite "boy" drew it forth. It was a superb piece of jade, flawless and richly emerald in its translucence.

The Annamite "boy" made a quick decision. Few people knew of the charm's presence on the Mynheer's chest. Unlike the ring and the watch, it was likely to be forgotten in the rapid "inquest" and burial. Deftly, unmindful of the fixed glazed eyes, he drew it over the dead man's head and rebuttoned the silk pyjamas. He then concealed the jade and its chain in his satin slipper and was doubly assured by the unusual feel of the gold between his toes. He glanced quickly about the cabin. Everything was in order. He would give the alarm. As he climbed to the Captain's cabin in a flood of moonlight, the incessant throbbing of the ship's screw was rivalled by the beating of his own heart.

*

*

*

It was late afternoon of the same day. The horizon was deserted. The sun, fantastic and superb in a panorama of pink and cobalt sky, was rapidly declining seawards. In this remorseless solitude the *Van Huis* proceeded southward to its destination in the Celebes.

Earlier, on the lower deck, the Annamite "boy" and a cluster of supple-limbed Moluccan sailors had spent an hour in watching the *serang* and his assistants preparing a canvas shroud.

Now, on the main deck, they could see the Captain and the ship's officers in a group encircling the canvas coffin. The Captain was reading from a book. His voice was loud and serious. The officers wore black silk bands upon the arms of their white drill suits.

Mynheer Van Kuylers was dead. He had died from heart failure. His death did not surprise the crew. Hasty burial at sea, necessitated by the great heat, was no uncommon sight to the majority of the Javanese. They had seen their own compatriots—victims of fever and tuberculosis—entrusted to the turquoise depths in many corner of the Equatorial waters. They were wholly unsentimental and mildly curious. To them, Mynheer Van Kuylers was a machine raucously shouting orders daily, an automaton, it was true, considerably less harsh and belligerent than the rest of the Dutch crew. At last the Chief Officers' protecting spirit had betrayed him, and a burial at sea was the natural climax.

Twilight deepened. Little gusts of wind arose intermittently, fading away as suddenly as they began. On the main deck the group was breaking apart. The Captain's voice ceased its grave monotone. The *serang* and his assistants moved forward to their task.

The Annamite "boy" surveyed the scene impassively. He was thinking of the Mynheer's jade charm which he had stowed away securely in the lining of his chattel-bag. His conscience troubled him a very little. Material considerations were uppermost in his philosophy. His master was about to be consigned to the maw of a sea spirit; there would be no generous tip forthcoming at the end of the voyage. Once more Prai-Yat sighed. He then discovered a comforting train of thought. The Mynheer, he told himself, would

not have objected to his personal "boy" taking his jade charm—it would merely be a reward for two years of faithful service. How many times had he industriously sharpened the Mynheer's razor, brought him *nasi goreng* in the dark hours when the watch was over and the Chinese cook snored pig-like in the pantry-berth? He had only taken what was due to him. He smiled dreamily, making plans. In six week's time he would desert the ship at Saigon. He would then be able to indulge in a game of *pho kam* with a full purse, brush against the silken tunics of his more opulent countrymen amicably over drowsy syrups, feast his eyes upon the charms of the romantically inclined Tonkinese waitresses at Cholon...

He was recalled from this shadow-world by the movements on the main deck. The *serang* and his men were lowering the shroud over the bulwarks. With a blank, inscrutable face Prai-Yat watched the final rites. He knew that he was safe. The theft would never be discovered now. He had been in the Chief Officer's cabin when the Captain had made a list of the dead man's effects—to be sent to a foreign land. He had seen the gold watch removed from his master's wrist. The jade charm was overlooked.

Prai-Yat yawned contentedly. The Mynheer's death had lightened the burden of life.

* * *

AGAIN that night the Annamite "boy" leant listlessly over the stern-rail and gave himself up to a realm of pleasant dreams. Looking at his

features, clearly outlined in the pale moonlight, one would have classified him as an ordinary ship's "boy" "eating" the night air and meditating with bovine calm. His *dolce far niente* attitude, his almost opium-stated expression, were common to most of the Chinese crew when the day's toil was over. But Prai-Yat surpassed his Chinese cousins in the versatility of his delicately alert imagination. His immobility of countenance betrayed no hint of the chaos of delight in his brain.

At that moment, gazing unheedfully at the ship's silver wake, he was creating a time-table for his distant future. He was walking, clad in a robe of white satin embroidered with contorted dragons, beside the River of Perfumes in the park of the sepulchers. Pink and yellow lotus blossom covered the water before him. The air was sweet with the scent of cassia and temple-flowers. His tomb was here, sedate and ornamental, overlooking in Chinese fashion the lakes and the distant hills. It was his to enjoy in life and for his soul to inhabit when life was abandoned. He could see the doves fluttering waywardly above the marble sepulchre, where miniature silver bells clinked musically in a soft breeze. Angry dragons and smiling dogs—demons and deities—and the frowning Gods of War were guarding him in the supreme calm of this new existence. His many sons, with strict filial piety, would come to burn joss-sticks of cloudy incense at the tomb and to appease the capricious evil spirits at the family astrologer's command.

The Annamite "boy" had achieved the greatest contentment.

At midnight, satiated with pleasant thoughts, he went below to his hot berth adjacent to the sleeping quarters of the Chinese Kitchen staff. He cast off his tunic and trousers and, putting on a singlet, stretched himself out languorously in the narrow bunk. In a few minutes he was asleep.

It was during this heavy sleep and fitful waking that the strange events occurred—and the Mynheer, his master, came back. There was no doubt about it. The Annamite "boy," his eyes dilated, saw Mynheer Van Kuylers standing in the shadows beside his berth as clearly as he had seen him daily during his two years' service as personal "boy." His presence was as real as the jet of moonlight which filtered through the hatch above. And the dead man was pointing to his bare chest.

A tremendous fear overwhelmed the Annamite "boy." The combined presence of the numerous evil spirits in his father's house was a mild haunting in contrast to this apparition of the dead Chief Officer. In despair he put both hands across his eyes. Then, after an interval of stark terror, he peeped fearfully between his clammy fingers. The huge form of the Mynheer was still there, pointing to his bare chest.

The Annamite "boy" emitted an involuntary shriek and again covered his eyes. A moment later he distinctly heard a movement beside his bunk. The dead Mynheer was going to touch him!...He shrieked again. When he withdrew

his fingers from his eyes, it was to see the Chinese cook standing beside him. The man's bald head glistened in the stream of moonlight. He was laughing gleefully, mockingly. To what sort of nightmare had the Annamite "boy" been a victim? What evil spirit had provoked his shrieks?

The other members of the kitchen staff began to appear in the doorway. Prai-Yat, reassured, complained of fever. He was ashamed at the cook's gibes. Disappointed at this absence of the occult, the Chinese unsympathetically returned to their berths.

Alone once more the Annamite's fears quickly returned. It was torture to open his eyes and glance into the shadows. After an hour's terrified vigil he rose, fearful of the Mynheer's unseen presence, and reached stealthily for his chattel-bag. The proximity of the Chinese necessitated absolute quietness. Furtively he ripped open the bag's lining and withdrew the jade charm and gold chain. Hurriedly he searched in the bag for a bunch of envelopes he had bought in Saigon—violet-hued, perfumed envelopes, beloved of the amorous Annamite dancing-girls.

When he found one, he placed the charm and its chain inside it and sealed the flap carefully. In a corner of the cabin lay a writing brush and a jar of Chinese ink. On the envelope he wrote his late master's name. The ill-spelt splashes of boyish handwriting were scarcely legible, but the Annamite "boy" was satisfied that the packet would reach Mynheer Van Kuylers safely, and thus the evil

spirit which had caused the haunting would be appeased. He dressed himself, left the cabin and crept silently to the stern of the vessel. From his old position at the rail he hurled the envelope far out into the bubbling wake of silver. With the return of the jade charm to the Mynheer, a thousand dreams were instantly dispersed.

But the dead officer would never come back.

Prai-Yat sighed.

Life was very difficult for a moneyless Annamite "boy."



IX. THE ECCENTRICITY OF SWAY LIM

IN the land of the Yellow Robe the temperate season was approaching its end; the second moon of Spring was already waning, and the kite-flying festivities were drawing to a desultory close. The nights no longer held their cool enchantment; the clear moonlit skies of January had ceased to pour their milky radiance over the City of Pagodas.

In a corner of Sway Lim's garden the wild peach-trees were heavily burdened with a cascade of pink and white blossom. And across the pathway, in the coffee-shop facing his own imposing walled-in mansion, sat Sway Lim himself, oblivious of this seasonal change. It was his habit to sit thus, memory-clad, sipping a bowl of tea in the obscurity of Lin Foo's lowly restaurant. He was a very old man—"old as the mountains of Shansi," his fellow-merchants called him—and full of the wisdom of his years. When any stranger looked at his long face, which resembled the shape of one of the melon-seeds he delighted to nibble, he would invariably be roused to interest in this benign relic of yesterday. Sway Lim, however, was proud of his unorthodox presence. He saw that meticulous care was taken with his toilet. Every morning his most privileged manservant combed his thin white beard and massaged the wrinkled skin of his hollow cheeks with fresh coconut oil;

his gums were likewise soothed with perfumed water; his lean, jade-encircled fingers enlivened with cool creams; his back scratched with instruments of pine and ivory.

Yet this toilet was not made with the purpose of "showing-off" to his fellow-men, for Sway Lim greatly disliked the high society of his successful colleagues in the realms of commerce. His attitude towards them was one of deep disdain.

Instead of cultivating the society of these "sash-wearers," it was his delight each evening to sit among the indigent souls in Lin Foo's coffee-shop. Occasionally a stranger to the city—maybe a *farang* commercial traveller—would ask him the way to the house of the merchant called Sway Lim. This caused him much amusement, and more than once he had misdirected foreigners or red-haired devils whose appearance and manner he intuitively disliked. They would never guess that the wealthy Sway Lim—wearing nothing but a sarong—found his recreation in a wayside, attap-roofed hut, frequented by rickshaw-coolies and their kind. Had it been an opium-den or a mah-jongg and chess house, it would have been explainable. His friends, too, regarded his habit as unsuited to one of his wealth, but Sway Lim only chuckled vivaciously, for the joy of living still throbbed melodiously in his veins. He loved to sit in this manner, alone, and to meditate on his long life—on the days when he was an exuberant clean-limbed young man in far Sze-Ch'uen, the Country-of-the-Clouds. In those days he was the handsomest

youth in his district, and a favourite visitor of the women in the flower boats, where the moonlit hours on the glass-calm river were whiled away to music from the silken strings of the melodious *kim*... He could still recollect the names of some of those bewitching, jasmine-scented maidens. Such memories were like little arrows of delight piercing his still vibrant mind.

When he wearied of this, he often went clandestinely for a stroll down the secluded alley behind the coffee-shop. It was dark there, and bat-haunted, and among the mangroves nocturnal-feeding crabs foraged amid the slime. The scene always excited Sway Lim. He knew that it was a dangerous walk at his age; there might be dacoits lurking in the shadows who could put a knife between his shoulders quicker than a flash of lightning. He knew, too, that his wife strictly disapproved of his harmless wanderings, so much so that the very thought of being disobedient to her wishes afforded him an immense exhilaration.

It was thus, in a spirit of contrariness and anticipated adventure, that Sway Lim set out shakily, one twilight towards the end of the temperate season, for the dark alley behind Lin Foo's coffee-shop.

*

*

*

HE had gone a few hundred yards, chuckling now and then at his own daring and occasionally making an obeisance to *Lung Wang*, the God of Clouds and Water, when he perceived that he was not alone in the crepuscular atmosphere of the

alley. Someone was approaching him and he began to feel a chill of fear. Dacoits were notorious for their activities at twilight. . .

As the newcomer appeared from the shadows, Sway Lim saw that it was one of his own race, a shabbily-dressed, wizened old man, presumably a pedlar. He carried a sack slung from his shoulder. Observing that his eyes were mild and benevolent, Sway Lim felt assured that this individual was a harmless character. He recognized him as a poverty-stricken fellow-countryman. He began to loosen the knot in his sarong to extract a fifty satang piece to give to the man. While doing so, he was surprised to hear the pedlar addressing him :

"Honoured sir—Thou art the merchant, Sway Lim ?"

"No mistake. What is thy business ?" Sway Lim answered curtly.

"I am a most humble medicine man."

"Whence comest thou ?"

"From a region of fair wonders—the province of Yunnan."

"What meanest thou ? Is it not well-known that Yunnan is a barren land ?" remarked Sway Lim with a dry sarcasm.

"I have sojourned in the city of Chiengsen," said the pedlar, preparing to open his sack. "Most honoured sir, I have here the Elixir of Life."

Sway Lim, who had no desire to buy any powders, produced his alms.

"Here is a cash. Spend wisely and venerate thine ancestors."

After handing the silver to the man, the merchant proceeded to walk away. He had barely gone ten yards when the medicine man was again at his side.

"Most honoured sir. . ."

Incensed at this pestering, Sway Lim shouted :
"Begone, thou son of a tortoise !"

The other took no notice of this warning and drew forth a package of herbs from his sack.

"Most venerated sir, I have here the Siamese medicine of the Gods, the Elixir of Life, the rare *Kwao Kua*, which groweth only in the forests of the north. It hath never yet failed. Thou thinkest thyself an old man, most honoured and preserved sir. It is possible thy judgment is correct. But age mattereth nought when the priceless *Kwao Kua* be taken wisely in the body. Once more the blood in thy veins will flow with greater swiftness than the waters of the Yellow River in the flooded gorges. Wilt thou oblige me, sir, by scanning these testimonials. . ."

Before Sway Lim could repulse him the pedlar had thrust a sheaf of soiled script into his fist, at the same time chattering with professional fluency :

"It is a medicine unique—the true restorer of eternal youth."

"Thou liest !" said Sway Lim.

"Nay honoured sir. The *tesa* of the northern province will bear witness to my words. He was an old man, toothless and childlike. His sight had so vanished that he could not tell the difference between a youth and a maid. Thou art young in

contrast, sir. His wrinkles lay deeper than any crevice in the mountains of Tibet. At night, in the cold season, he was compelled to use five blankets to keep in the coveted warmth. He awaited death with righteous fear... Then thine humble servant visited his mansion with the rare, the most wonderful *Kwao Kua*, the rejuvenator of..."

"Dost thou guarantee that I shall be a sucking babe again?" interjected Sway Lim with terse facetiousness.

"I crave thy patience for my tale, most honoured sir," replied the pedlar in a grieved tone.

"I listen," said Sway Lim, who despite his scornful disbelief was by now interested in the pedlar's story.

"To continue, most respected sir... the *tesa* took this most Heaven-sent medicine for ten months, and lo! the promised miracle was fulfilled. In the cold season he found that one blanket sufficed to keep him warm; teeth were restored to his sunken gums; mobility returned to his withered limbs—his eyes were illuminated with adolescent eagerness..."

But Sway Lim was laughing unrestrainedly now.

"Lei-la! Lei-la! Thou art a comic character," he told the pedlar. "Thy gift of invention is superb. The *lakon* is thy proper sphere."

The pedlar, however, was crestfallen at this mirthful reception of his tale. Sadly he reprimanded Sway Lim for his laughter and denied that he was a liar.

"...I have not concluded, most revered sir."

"Resume thy story," directed Sway Lim.

"A year afterwards, most noble sir, the *tesa* became the jubilant father of a male child."

"Incredible!" said Sway Lim, no longer laughing.

"It is true—thou canst read it in the testimonial herewith. Thou art not so old——"

"I am within sight of the tombs of my forefathers," interrupted Sway Lim. "I do not desire any additions to my family. But thou art a storyteller of the first water. Here is a reward for thy persiflage."

Taking a handful of satangs from the knot in his sarong, he gave them to the pedlar.

"Most honoured sir..."

"Enough! Enough!" shouted Sway Lim in a decisive voice, and the pedlar, observing his determination, repacked his Elixir of Life and moved off into the shadows, which by now were luminous with fire-flies and resonant with the chirping of a myraid crickets.

*

*

*

WHEN he returned to the walled-in precincts of his mansion opposite the coffee shop, Sway Lim uttered a deep groan, for he beheld two rickshaws drawn up within the gateway. He knew what this signified—his two sons were paying him a visit. Now Sway Lim had no great liking for his offspring; he could tolerate them at monthly intervals, but the too-frequent sight of his elder-born, Mah Foong, a cadaverous individual aged

sixty-five, caused him to shudder involuntarily. His other son, Boon Mee, who was sixty, was hardly less unlikeable, being a heavy-paunched fellow with a countenance lined by extravagant living. His regard for his father—as Sway Lim very well knew—was of a materialistic nature almost equivalent to that of his elder brother. Of late their visits to the paternal home had become excessively frequent, and Sway Lim knew that his money was the incentive for this display of filial affection. During his early middle-age he had sometimes been ignored by the furtive-eyed Mah Foong for a period of years, in spite of having been a good father to the youth, whom he had chastised no more than was customary, though he might well have been a tyrant in the matter of corporal punishment, for the proverb of Ming Po sayeth: “Three things will never create a scandal—beating your horse; beating your wife; beating your children.”

His younger son, Boon Mee, had never neglected him for so long, but on the other hand, he had never shown any signs of being a dutiful son until his parent's senility was well advanced. And yet, last week, through an open door, Sway Lim had heard him remark petulantly: “Ah Yoh! My father is an eccentric old man: the moonlight dwelleth in his brain.”

Thus it was natural that Sway Lim was not elated by the sight of the private rickshaws of his sons. With a heavy heart he entered the cool court-yard of his house. As he expected, Mah

Foong and Boon Mee were recumbent there, sipping tea, in the corner where a giant bowl of golden carp glittered against the rays of an ornate petrol lamp. They were clad in garments of richly flowered silk. When they observed his approach they rose and bowed with heavy obesquiousness. Mah Foong then patted his father on the back.

"My father, I rejoice to see thee."

"Thine absence causeth me grave concern," purred Boon Mee.

Sway Lim recoiled from their sycophancy. That he should have two such dandified creatures as sons made him sigh with unmitigated sadness.

"Comest thou to visit thy mother?" he asked them querulously, knowing that neither of them ever thought of the old woman.

"We come also to visit thee," said Mah Foong, glancing hurriedly at his brother.

"The time and season findeth thee in good health?" queried Boon Mee in a silky tone.

"Thou seest me yestermorn. I am not better nor worse," Sway Lim replied bitterly. He yearned for his sons' departure, so that he could sit down in peace to an evening meal of bird's-nest soup and a bowl of broth made from pork and water-lily. And he would need a glass of *sam-sui* to relieve him of the gloom created by this unlooked-for visit.

"We pray incessantly for thy good health, O venerated Sire," crooned Mah Foong.

This was too much for Sway Lim, the floodgates of whose temper had borne a sore stain for many

months past. A fanastic idea suddenly entered his angered brain. He turned wrathfully upon his immaculately-clothed offspring. Surveying the two of them from scowling lids he roared out :—

“My eldest son, Mah Foong, thou art a liar only equalled in skill by thy brother, Boon Mee. I am an old man. Doubtless thou prayest hourly for my early decease. Thou art like vultures hovering over a lost traveller in Gobi. Alas for thee ! My aged veins contain more of the spirit of life than thine combined hath ever held. The Day-star of my old age burneth strongly...but I am aware that thou carest not a cash for thy parents' welfare. It is the God of Wealth, the lordly *Ts'ai Shen* whom thou lovest with the gross affection of the evildoer. Thou art an unseemly pair for whom I have no natural liking, yet I am the maker of thy being. Therefore it behoveth me to dispose of my wealth towards my own seed.”

Upon hearing this, the eyes of Mah Foong and Boon Mee sparkled with avaricious interest. Their father was about to touch upon the one subject which had occupied their minds for many moons.

“To-morrow,” continued Sway Lim, “I go to Lye Hwang, the eminent lawyer, who draweth up my will according to my final and definite wishes. Listen with gleeful ears, my sons, to the conditions therein. I have made adequate provision for thy mother, and I shall bequeath my fortune of one hundred thousand baht, and my house property, to whichever of you shall have the most extensive family at the hour of my decease.”

Pausing Sway Lim watched his offspring carefully. He was becoming amused. A troubled look had crept across the features of Mah Foong, while the eyes of Boon Mee were pregnant with grave astonishment.

"Alas, my father," said Mah Foong, "we are both elderly men; our families are middle-aged. This thing is not possible. Thou jokest?"

"Nay," replied Sway Lim. "That is the condition in my will. I shall not change it though thou sprinklest ashes of remorse upon thy bald pates. My son, Mah Foong, what is the extent of thy legitimate progeny?"

"Thy line hath been carried on by my seed of eight."

"And thine, Boon Mee?"

"I am the sire of a similar number, O, father."

"So," chuckled Sway Lim, "thou hast an equal chance."

He was enjoying the discomfiture of his sons with a great relish.

"Alas, I am past middle-age," Mah Foong cried, being agitated to the point of hysteria.

"That is a strange will—it passeth my understanding." Boon Mee muttered sulkily.

"Perchance the moonshine dwelleth in thy father's brain," Sway Lim spoke the words suavely, and he saw Boon Mee wince. Then the old man roused himself and addressed his sons in a clear, authoritative voice.

"Before thou returnest home, I shall impart to thee a knowledge of deep significance. Thou hast

never heard of the Siamese medicine of the Gods, the Elixir of Life, the rare, the Heaven-sent *Kwao Kua*, which groweth in the forests of Chiengsen. It is a medicine unique—the rejuvenator which hath never failed yet. Procure it from the medicine men of the north, and once more thine eyes will blaze with adolescent delight and the joy of life return to thy decrepit frames. Rememberest thou the name—the rare, the most wonderful *Kwao Kua*...and now farewell, my sons.”

Majestically Sway Lim departed for the inner courts of his mansion, where the odour of roast sucking pig smote his eager nostrils.

And out in the courtyard, a moment later, Mah Foong complained ruefully to Boon Mee as they seated themselves in their private rickshaws.

“This is a terrible thing, for I am an old man.”

“The moonlight dwelleth in my father’s brain,” remarked Boon Mee gloomily.

*

*

*

FOLLOWING upon Sway Lim’s decision—on a whim engendered by his sudden anger—to dispose of his fortune in this manner, turmoil reigned in the households of his offspring. No longer did Mah Foong and Boon Mee consort together in brotherly conclave. Instead they avoided each other’s company and, on the few occasions they came face to face, viewed each other furtively with jealous eyes, mutually apprehensive of every casual movement. Never again did they go together to their father’s mansion; the hired spies of Mah Foong acquainted their employer with every

trivial action of Boon Mee, while the servants of Boon Mee accurately recorded for the edification of their master the period of time that Mah Foong spent daily in his bath.

Only once, since the night they heard of the will, had the brothers held any conversation. That meeting took place in a renowned apothecary's shop in the Sampeng, where they unexpectedly came upon each other in the act of buying the fats and juices of the rhinoceros—Mah Foong was greatly surprised when, from across a lacquer screen he heard his brother's silken voice demanding the price of a rejuvenating physic, compounded of the bristles of the southern Siamese rhinoceros. A little later he beheld Boon Mee staring at him as he drank, from a hollow bamboo, a draft of the medicine.

Out of eyes seething with hatred they leered at each other. The awkwardness of the encounter was terminated at last by the apothecary's arrival with a large basket containing the tail bristles of the forest animal. His price was an exorbitant one, but both Mah Foong and Boon Mee paid it gladly, and the apothecary rubbed his hands with satisfaction, for it was seldom that these devitalised mandarins agreed to hand over the money without a spate of bargaining.

Many months later one of Boon Mee's spies acquainted his master with a piece of startling news. The wife of Mah Foong was expecting a confinement. The unpleasant intelligence affected Boon Mee deeply. He attempted to console himself

with a pipe of opium, but the customary bliss to be found therein was lacking. No diversion could drive away the realisation of such soul-disturbing news.

To make matters worse, the health of his father, Sway Lim, was rapidly declining. The old man was no longer sufficiently hale to visit the coffee-shop of Lin Foo. His eyes had ceased to twinkle ; his mind wandered, his appetite vanished. Boon Mee observed these signs with perturbation on each occasion he visited him. Despair overcame the younger son. His hatred and envy of Mah Foong brought him a sequence of sleepless nights. Then one evening, as he sat disconsolately chewing melon-seeds in his court-yard, Boon Mee's attention was drawn to the sounds of jubilation emanating from the *Kuei*, the feminine portion of the house. Roused to anger by this most unseemly hubbub, Boon Mee rose and slithered noisily towards his wife's apartment. At the door he found himself confronted by his wife, a comely woman with eyebrows like moths' wings. She was smiling and gesticulating in a fashion that tended to increase his wrath. But as soon as he heard the excited words which bubbled forth from her crimson lips, his passion subsided immediately.

When Boon Mee realised the full purport of her news he became buoyant with joy. Now that he was a prospective parent again, like Mah Foong, he could afford to be kind and generous to his wife. That night he bought her a costly necklace of jade, translucent and breathtakingly beautiful in its dark green flawlessness.

Very soon Mah Foong heard the report concerning Boon Mee's wife and he bled his palms with uncontrolled rage. It was their father's health which mattered now. Thoughts—darker than a vulture's wing—coursed through Mah Foong's brain. If he could contrive that his parent should die immediately after his own child was born, and before the wife of Boon Mee gave birth—but that would be difficult, for it would be a matter of a short interval between the two births. The desperate plan of poisoning his father entered Mah Foong's mind. It was against all the honourable canons of ancestor-worship, but the circumstances called for drastic action.

It was a useless project, however, since Boon Mee, being aware of the dark nature of his brother's character, anonymously warned the attendants and medical advisers of Sway Lim, who took care to double their normal precautions. Sway Lim, on his part, was too ill to take any interest in the approaching confinement of his daughters-in-law. Moribund, he lay and babbled with childish nonchalance of his youth in far Sze-chuen. In this way he lingered on for a period of several moons.

He was a dying man when the wife of Mah Foong was delivered of a girl-child. The happy event, instead of invoking the ecstasy of Mah Foong, increased his agitation. Each day his spies carried to him fresh reports of the condition of Boon Mee's wife, and hourly he visualised a fortune of fifty thousand baht slipping from his grasp, for the lawyer had told him that, if his brother became the

father of a ninth child before Sway Lim died, the old man's fortune would be divided equally between them. Realising this, Mah Foong savagely had his spies to bribe the servants of Sway Lim's wife. An attempt was made to give the patient an overdose of a Siamese narcotic—but the wiliness of Sway Lim's personal attendants again proved impregnable. Bribery, Mah Foong discovered, was a costly speculation.

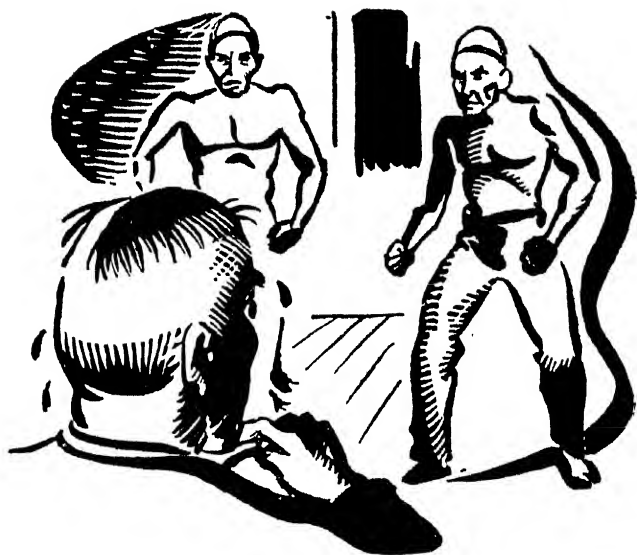
Baulked on all sides, he saw no alternative to the equal division of the money, since the hour of Boon Mee's prospective parenthood was at hand.

Resignedly Mah Foong awaited the announcement from his spies. They came hesitantly into his chamber one evening, shuffling uneasily and avoiding his direct gaze. At last one spoke.

"*Sang tui ma chai*," he said, and Mah Foong's face turned doubly pallid.

...The wife of Boon Mee had given birth to twins.





X. THE HOUSE OF BENEVOLENT PLENTY

M^{R.} BRUNT led a variegated existence. A commercial traveller, his field was the Far East from Colombo to Tokio. For many years he had sold haberdashery in the chief cities of the Orient. He represented a good firm and his merchandise practically sold itself. The "towkays" in Canton regarded him as a genial, trustworthy little man. In Ceylon he was dubbed a "box-wallah" of good repute.

The trip by easy stages from Batavia to Tokio, *via* Singapore, Saigon and the Chinese cities took up six months of Mr. Brunt's year. The residue of his time he spent in a Sheffield suburb with his wife and mother-in-law. It was a tranquil period, after his footslogging in the East, and he found ample time to indulge pleasantly in his two hobbies—bridge and ventriloquism. The latter accomplishment caused him to be in great demand at social gatherings, where his wife was justifiably proud of his skill

*

*

*

I USED to meet Mr. Brunt regularly once a year in Bangkok. He invariably stayed at an hotel beside the River Menam. Under the riotous flame trees on the lawn we had an annual meal. On those occasions fire-flies drifted about us, and the river was romantic with brown-sailed junks and sampans, a great pagoda glittering majestically on the farther bank.

After finishing our cigars it was our custom to visit a cabaret, for Mr. Brunt was a connoisseur of Oriental dancing-halls. In Manila he was a well-known patron of the establishment where they serve the flower-wine called "Children's Laughter"; in Saigon the Sahnsien-players at the best places of entertainment were familiar with his genial figure, and in Bangkok he was acquainted with the family histories of many of the *puyings* in the Royal Ballet. I know that he took a purely platonic interest in the dancers; it was a sort of mental escape from the prosaic daily traffic in

haberdashery. He was podgy of figure and a poor dancer, but he found enjoyment in conversing with his partners. He was fluent in most Oriental languages and could even back-chat skilfully in various Chinese dialects.

This side of his life interested me. The glamour of it was somehow heightened by the four months or so of domesticity each year in Sheffield, where his ventriloquial act with a stuffed Sudanese parrot would arouse fervid enthusiasm in elderly maiden ladies. At our last dinner beside the river in Bangkok, Mr. Brunt told me of an experience he had met with the previous year in the Chinese quarter of the city. It happened as follows :

“I’m a cautious sort of person,” he said, “and I don’t as a rule stray down dark alleys in a Chinese slum area. Not, mind you, that I agree with the customary Western idea that the Chinaman is a thorough-paced scoundrel. On the contrary, I hold that the lower classes amongst Asiatic peoples are a kinder, more courteous and cultured lot than their Western prototypes. Fu-Manchu is the exception rather than the rule. The average lower-class Chinese is, in my view, moral and domesticated to a far higher degree than, for instance, the English workman. Look at the English Sunday newspapers and their appalling headlines : ‘Girl tells of struggle with soldier in ditch.’ That sort of thing. But I’m digressing.

“As I was saying, I’m a canny person, but my adventurous spirit occasionally outstrips my caution. Last year it almost led to my undoing.

It was during the monsoon. I was mentally tired after a heavy day's business with a comprador at Bantawai. I left the hotel after a leisurely dinner and decided to seek out a new cabaret of which I had heard down Sampeng way. That, as you know, is a fairly civilized area—pawnshops, opium-dens, haunts where chapsuey and mild gambling go together. There is always an adequate supply of Siamese police in the district.

"The new cabaret was called the 'House of Benevolent Plenty.' Somebody told me it was run by a Russian woman, an emigrée from Harbin. I went down New Road, hailed a rickshaw and bid the owner to bring me without fail to the 'House of Benevolent Plenty.' I spoke in Cantonese. The man understood and we set out through a labyrinth of by-streets, most of which were familiar to an old jade-hunter like myself.

"Soon, however, we came to a neighbourhood I had never visited before—little narrow, overhanging streets, musty and squalid, rather like the Old Port at Marseilles. The shop signs were caked with decades of dirt. There were many smells—joss-sticks, turmeric, camphor-wood, a drift of opium. There was very little illumination, which struck me as unusual for Chinese night-life. I was getting somewhat apprehensive when the coolie stopped outside a tall, isolated building with green-shuttered windows. He indicated that this was my destination.

"*Farang yu ti ni?* I asked uncertainly, anxious

to find out whether the place was really under foreign management. The coolie's face brightened, and he gave the affirmative *Ai yah*. I paid him off and entered the building without hesitation. The fact that the staircase was decrepit and unswept did not deter me from entering, for I have found amusing dancing establishments in Shanghai in the most unpromising surroundings. I climbed five flights of semi-dark steps before I reached a lantern-lit doorway across which a chain of Chinese characters was scrawled in chalk. This was the 'House of Benevolent Plenty.'

"I knocked loudly. Through a window below I could see in the fleeting moonlight a pair of beggars scavenging grimly in a refuse dump. The sight invoked in me a momentary horror similar to that which certain drawings of Gustave Doré used to arouse in my mind during childhood. The door in front of me opened suddenly and I saw two tall Manchus just inside. Beyond them stood an extremely fat European woman. A gold snake ornament hung sinisterly beneath the rolls of fat at her neck. She wore a low red velvet dress.

"'You've a new cabaret, madam?' I asked tentatively, as I entered. She seemed a little surprised to see a customer.

"'Oh, yess,' she answered. 'Some nice girls and good champagne.' She led me into an ill-lit room. The air was stale and smoke-laden. A few rattan-chairs were scattered about untidily. On a couch in the far corner I saw two more fat Russian women.

I took an immediate dislike to them and to their surroundings. There was nothing to cheer one there. I was accustomed to vivacious Siamese dancing partners, talkative and gay as mynahs.

“‘Here are Sonia and Tatiana,’ the woman in red velvet announced, leering at me. ‘Bring champagne, Foong.’ At her bidding I saw one of the Manchus go behind a curtain. I quickly decided I must leave the place. It was a sordid hoax, no music and, apparently, no clientèle.

“‘I shant want any champagne,’ I said bluntly. ‘I’m going.’

“The woman in red velvet then became very agitated and angry.

“‘You cannot go now. Foong has opened two bottles of champagne. Put on the gramophone, Tatiana.’

“‘I’m going, Madam,’ I said firmly, as I moved towards the doorway. By then I was unnerved by the malevolent atmosphere of the place. Frankly, I was afraid. When I heard the woman in velvet shout an order shrilly to the Manchus, I began to wonder whether I was cornered, for I found my path blocked by the two menacing Chinese. I noticed that they were now wearing knuckle-dusters. They stood stubbornly before the door. Their faces seemed to me the epitome of evil intentions.

“I had never before found myself in so unpleasant a situation, isolated, five flights up in an unknown quarter of Sampeng. I was foolish, of course, but the fact that the place was under

European management had misled me. I began sub-consciously to think of Europeans who had disappeared mysteriously in the night-life of Oriental cities, of the British Consul's unavailing enquiries, of a laconic paragraph in the newspapers about a lost European. I grew more unsettled as I looked into the proprietress's angry countenance. She spoke in raucous, threatening tones.

"If you do not pay, we can very easily get the money from you."

"Madam, if you don't remove these men immediately——"

"Then a voice, stern and clear, made itself heard outside the door behind the two Manchus.

"*Rawangsi, taharn tja ma!* ('Beware, the police are coming!'), the voice said in Siamese. I saw consternation on the faces of the woman in velvet and the two Manchus. The latter ran from the doorway and I quickly opened it and made as swift an escape as possible for a man of my age. I literally fell down one flight of stairs. Once in the street I knew I was safe, yet I ran for several hundred yards. A good effort for a man of fifty-two!"

Mr. Brunt ceased speaking. A fire-fly flickered its lamp above his head. A fisherman in a sampan near by was playing a Siamese love-song. The liquid notes of a viol fell softly on the warm air.

"I don't understand," I said, "Why you ran away when you heard the Siamese saying at the door that the police were at hand."

““There was no Siamese at the door,” Mr. Brunt remarked impressively.

“I thought you mentioned that a Siamese voice said ‘Beware, the police are coming !’”

“That was my own voice,” said Mr. Brunt, with immense satisfaction.



XI. A GIFT FOR CHALEEO

IT was a year since he had come to Saigon, the gay metropolis of his countrymen. Through Annam, down the Old Mandarin Road, he had travelled on foot—an arduous journey of sun-blinded days. At night he had slept by the wayside, while the jackals barked their uneasiness over the land, and the melancholy songs of the farmers drifted across the wide, milk-hued tapestry of sky. He had run away from home—the attap-hut, odorous of stale smoke and dried sweat, where his tyrannical crone of a grandmother ruled a barren hearth.

His first days in the big city were difficult ones. He had become in turn a beggar, a rickshaw-puller, and a back-scratcher to a wealthy Chinese. Finally he had found sanctuary at Sway Lim's opium-house. His business consisted in soliciting for smokers outside the cafés at Cholon and, occasionally, in approaching the more seedy-looking Europeans on the Rue Catinat. His automatic cry, *Fumer, m'seu? Moi connais bon*, was well known to the colonial flotsam which habitually came to life at sundown.

The clientele of exiles at the cafés then began its lack-lustre efforts to ape the motherland's vesperal pleasures. The Rue Catinat at that hour was a bastard-like commingling of East and West. The

cafés, awakened shrilly to their trade, exuded a tawdry glamour. In the larger establishments the Parisian-clad wives of government officials rubbed shoulders with tourists and the Annamite aristocracy. In the *maisons* of lesser repute, Algerian conscripts, rough-complexioned European seamen, Eurasians, and a medley of unclassifiable persons, sought solace in the drowsy syrups of the moment.

The glitter of the Rue Catinat appealed to Chaleco. Often he found himself staring at his own image in one of the large gilt mirrors in a café doorway. His dark sepia limbs were supple and well-formed; his face had a hint of that spiritual beauty which is common amongst the peasantry of the Far East. The mirrors afforded him unlimited amusement, until a too officious head-waiter would appear and, apoplectic with annoyance, would gustily warn him off the premises.

The commission which Chaleco received from Sway Lim for bringing fresh customers to his shop was a paltry one, but free rice and lodging were also supplied. The shop was situated in an alleyway in the heart of the Chinese quarter of the city. In the day-time there was a cavern-like atmosphere about the district. There was no sanitation; thin, bony pariah-dogs acted as effective scavengers. Cobwebs in their dusty thickness resembled ropes. The sunlight was a stranger in the musty recesses of many of the shops. Sallow-faced Annamite women crouched listlessly behind the tills in the intervals snatched from feeding their ever-growing families.

At night, however, the alley-way was gay with lanterns; a smell of burning joss-sticks mingled with the semi-sour fumes of opium. Fantastic Cantonese symbols, resembling random splashes of red paint, illuminated the facades of the low, ramshackle wooden dwellings. Upstairs, in Sway Lim's shop, senile mandarins could then be seen ecstatically asleep. In the dark precincts below, the smooth raised *salas* were crowded with the gaunt yellow bodies of rickshaw coolies. The eyes of those who were half awake were still clouded by the substance of their dreams. The wrinkled placidity of their faces and their austere scorn often held Chaleeo spellbound. Usually, one or two of the smokers were to be seen plucking the strings of Annamite violins, their faces lit with a remote, sad happiness. Others, wide awake, their jaundiced eyes keen in reminiscence, were seeking to recapture the lost bliss which the drug had brought to them. A day's sweat-soaked slavery on the streets must be undergone before their paradise could be regained.

Chaleeo soon became at home amidst that sea of yellow, anaesthetized bodies. The faces of most of the inmates grew familiar to him. He was accustomed to their various poses in sleep, indicating the dark enchantment of their dreams—hunched shoulders, body asprawl, the single raised knee, the twitching hand spread eloquently across the navel. Sometimes Sway Lim rewarded him for his night's work by regaling him with green Chinese tea and pieces of ginger from Amoy, while his eyes

would wander incessantly towards his assistants as they diligently dealt out the tubes of government opium. On those occasions Chaleco was pleased with life and felt no regrets at having come to the great city.

*

*

*

HE had been several months in Sway Lim's service when a mistake occurred. He was upstairs, in the select quarters of the shop, when he indiscreetly drew back the shutter of a peep-hole. Instead of a mandarin, he saw a European lying on a mattress a few feet away. A towel clothed his wasted body. Chaleco, his eyes magnetized by the man's stare, apologised for his accidental intrusion on his privacy.

"Come in, by all means," the inmate shouted to him. He was an old man, with sunken gums and pallid, wrinkled features. His eyes were blue, and what remained of his hair had a golden tinge.

"Come in," he repeated, "I should like a chat. You will observe I haven't yet begun to smoke."

His lighter was ready at his side. His pipe was prepared. Shamefacedly Chaleco entered and, as bidden, seated himself beside the bedding. The elderly addict cackled vivaciously.

"You're my first visitor for a long time—it must be a month since the missionary made his last attempt to redeem me. But I've only myself to blame. Goethe said: 'Men are swimming pots which knock against each other.' I'm afraid I've ceased to resemble a swimming pot. I've accepted

my isolation and grown tendrils of understanding. What's your name?"

"Chaleeo."

The old man raised himself to a comfortable sitting position. His hollowed cheeks and temples shone with striking serenity in the dim light. A wave from the past narrowed his eyes. Fascinated, Chaleeo watched him lighting his pipe.

"Make yourself comfortable, boy. Have you ever heard of me? I'm one of this city's old stagers. You'll see my name in the local paper under the column headed *Il y en a trente cinq ans*. I recovered from Cholera in 1906. I was a good journalist in those days—I first began to smoke ten years ago. Let me tell you, my worthy Chaleeo, it's a little vice. There is mental pabulum in it. It is one of the pleasantest methods of fanning the cooling embers of one's life.

"If, my dear Chaleeo, I had taken the orthodox turning—traffic was directed less well in those days!—I might now have been sitting in an arm-chair before a log fire in a London Club, reading *The Times*, the print called 'The Monarch of the Glen' facing me, or indulging in a mild verbal skirmish with a fellow-member. I might have let a respectable middle-class English-woman share my income with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, some good soul who would see that the Sunday joint was roasted to perfection. O licit Hymen! For years, my estimable Chaleeo, she would kiss me with the warmth of one sticking a stamp on a letter, send me off to the club punctiliously each day——"

The old man was laughing uproariously. Chaleco, whose knowledge of English was confined to a few touting phrases, had not understood any of the ranting speech. But the old man had a kind look in his eyes. Chaleco, with the interest with which he regarded all Europeans, was not afraid of him.

*

*

*

THE old man was accustomed to arrive at Sway Lim's shop a little before sundown each evening. He invariably came punctually in a rickshaw. After that first meeting Chaleco saw him on many occasions. The message from Sway Lim, bidding him to go upstairs to that dark odour-filled room, became more frequent, and soon he was attending daily upon the old man, cleaning his pipe, garnering the dross, and acting as a target for his garrulous rhetoric. It was known in the neighbouring opium shops that the elderly addict had taken a liking to Chaleco, and as a reward for the youth's patience had bestowed upon him eccentric gifts—golden fighting-fish with filmy veils about their bodies, roast cockroaches which elderly Annamite *gourmets* delighted to sample, love charms made from the tail bristles and blood of the rhinoceros, a tandem bicycle. . .

This last gift Chaleco greatly appreciated. It raised the donor to a pedestal in his estimation. He realized vaguely that the presents were by way of compensation for listening to the old man's inexhaustible self-revelations. He knew that he had also risen in Sway Lim's regard. The fact that the oldest European addict had chosen him as his confidant was a strong argument in his favour. .

The other Annamite servants began to look upon him as one endowed with an especial magic, for the old *farang* had hitherto been surly and bad-tempered towards all the household staff.

Upstairs the old man continued to talk in his more conscious moments. The remnant of his golden-tinged hair shone vividly in the shadows of that twilit world. The sight of Chaleeo was an incentive to his tongue.

A chaos of rich visions would then roll forth from his store of memories, a golden *braggadocio* would colour the air. Periodically he was melancholy and his reminiscences were tainted with self-pity. Raising an attenuated hand, he would babble:

"Here am I, Chaleeo, a pretty derelict you'll say. But I was a good, God-fearing journalist once—a young man of sunny flesh like yourself. Fleet street is my spiritual home. There is a little pub off Racquet Court—I'd like my ashes to be sprinkled in the sawdust there. That would be a scoop for someone! They used to make you a good welsh-rarebit—it's difficult to realize I haven't been to the old country for—well, I'm becoming sentimental. The derelict! Ostracized by all. It's lucky I'm an Ishmael by instinct. I'm content. Sway Lim's opium shop is good enough for me. No London Club could offer me the superb contentment contained in my pipe—you might medicine me with a further supply, my worthy Chaleeo."

And refilling the pipe, Chaleeo would allow his thoughts to turn to the present—the multi-coloured sarong or the birdcage—which the old

man had given him that evening.

* * *

One afternoon, late in the brief cold season, Chaleco made his customary visit to that second-storey room. It was very quiet then; even the hollow, death-presaging coughs in the street beneath seemed stilled. A sprinkling of lanterns had been lit, but the clamorous throb of the quarter's night-life was still absent. From the silence, and the lack of the stereotyped greeting, Chaleco imagined that the old man had already begun to smoke and, momentarily jealous, he wondered if his privileged position as servant had been usurped by another. His eyes growing accustomed to the semi-darkness, he saw the old man lying motionless on his mattress, and he realized that his pipe had not been lit. Adjacent to the burner a hand lay limply...

With a tremendous fear Chaleco forced himself to touch the gaunt fingers. A moment later he lit a candle and peered at the still, cold features of his friend. The eyes, fixed in death, had their old benevolence. Then, beside the stiff body, Chaleco saw a camphor-wood box with a label upon which his own name was inscribed in Annamite characters. Here was a "Gift for Chaleco." Half-afraid, he opened the box and perceived that it was filled with piastre notes of high value. Glancing back at the shadowy whiteness which was the old man's countenance, he raised his hands in blessing...

In the street below, the sound of a viol betokened that the quarter's night-life had begun.





XII. DIAGNOSIS

THE waiting-room was vacant. Hartwell strode across and rang the bell which lay half-concealed under the prominent label—

DR. THOMAS THOROUGHGOOD

It was four years since he had last visited the doctor. Dysentery had been his trouble then, and the old charlatan had succeeded in aggravating his

condition in his most euphemistic professional manner. Sometimes he had since met him at the Club bar, when a process of delicate touting for his patronage invariably ensued over a 'stengah' whisky and soda. In vain, for hitherto no occasion needful of the saving graces of medical attendance had arisen. It was not that he, Erick Hartwell, suffered from any tendencies towards Christian Science, but it was a matter of good health combined with a firm belief that the majority of general practitioners were helpless in any psychological or abstract mental case. Offer them a sore throat or a broken arm and even a climate-withered, out-of-date old moron like Thoroggood could render assistance—charging five ticals at sight.

Discontentedly Hartwell turned over the pages of a time-worn copy of *Punch*. Then he went across to the window and gazed down into the colourful maze of traffic, the resonant rumble of which was punctuated by the shrill warning cries of the perspiration-soaked rickshaw-coolies. The everchanging kaleidoscope of a populous eastern city passed before his weary vision. Idly he watched the water-carriers pursue their burdened course with ant-like rapidity.

"You wish to see Dr. Thoroggood?"

A Chinese servant, suavely ingratiating, stood addressing Hartwell from the doorway.

"I do."

"The name, please?"

"E. Hartwell, of the *Eastern Asiatic Gazette*."

"Will you please wait one minute, sir."

The smiling, mechanical countenance was withdrawn and Hartwell again turned to the aged copies of *Punch*. But he could not concentrate on the scintillant proprieties displayed therein. He found his thoughts straying rat-like into the sinister recesses of his memory. He was a fool not to have visited a European doctor sooner. One of his more bibulous friends, a Tamil physician with an uncertain Calcutta degree, had vaguely diagnosed a variation of eczema. He might have caught some infection from a native woman. Of course he had always been too reckless where women were concerned. It was the heat, and the lack of social amenities which had caused him—as the magazine writers termed it—to ‘go native’ to a certain extent. If he had been of a more monogamous nature it would have been less hazardous. As it was, he had known a score of women within the last six months—Siamese, Burmese, Louk-Chines, and that Mohn girl from down-river.

Hartwell rose and followed the ‘boy’ down the passage to a half-opened door through which an elderly man of ungainly physique could be seen making a note on a card-index. Hartwell smiled as he entered the room; he knew that old Thoroggood never lost five ticals through forgetfulness in indexing the number of his patients visits. The doctor was bowing professionally. His pallid, wrinkled countenance curled into an ape-like grin of welcome.

“Well, Hartwell, it’s a long time since you’ve troubled me.”

"I've come in desperation, doctor."

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"It may not be anything serious, but it's unpleasantly irritating."

"Well, well... Prickly Heat?"

"That's a uniformly useful track, doctor, but it's the wrong one this time."

"H'm. Tell me about yourself."

"I haven't been feeling too well within the last few months. I suppose you would call it general lassitude. I've been abnormally sleepy at times."

"Appetite good?"

"No."

"Any fever?"

"Sometimes."

"How about the drink, h'm?"

"I haven't had a thimbleful for three months now. I was afraid it might be affecting the skin."

"The skin?"

"Yes. I've a rash on parts of the body. It's full and coppery—something like the rind of an orange in appearance. It's particularly bad low down at the nape of my neck. Dr. Veerasamy, a Tamil friend of mine—he's from Calcutta University—says it's a type of eczema which will benefit from injections. He has given me six with no effect."

"What made you go to this man?"

"He's cheap and sincere and, as you know, doctor, race distinctions never influence me."

"Many of these Tamils are quacks."

"Maybe. But you will agree they are excellent

where abortions are concerned."

The doctor's features hardened rigidly against such flippancy.

"Have you ever had malarial poison?"

"I've never had malaria in any form."

"Let's look at your chest and back."

Taking off his coat and shirt, Hartwell watched the doctor busy himself with a basin of test tubes. Poor old Thoroghgood! 'Doubting Thomas' the European community labelled him, for the unconvincing manner in which his diagnoses were put forth. Why had he come to him? Was it from fear? Or was it a case of the doubtful solace to be gained by the free unburdening of his mind.

"I want a specimen of your blood," the doctor was saying.

As he approached with rubber-gloved hands and a bowl which reeked stalely of lysol, Hartwell felt a sudden prompting to flee away from the place. Yet, a moment later, he found himself submitting with child-like docility to the man's touch.

"You're right. It's a nasty rash. How long has it been like this?"

"Three months. Sometimes it has improved slightly."

"H'm. I don't like these copper-hued scabs."

Hartwell smiled at the platitude.

"Neither do I," he muttered, with an irony which failed to pierce the professional gravity of his examiner.

"Can you tell me if the fever coincided with any intensification of the rash?"

"I did."

"H'm. I'll just take a specimen of the infected skin along with the blood."

Stoically Hartwell bore the incision at his fingertop. It amused him to watch a bead of blood—the luscious colour of old port wine—transferred to the slide.

"I'll give you an ointment. When can you come back?"

"For what?"

"For the diagnosis."

"To-morrow afternoon."

"Three-o'clock. Now there's one little question I have to ask you. It's a question of vital importance in any ailment of a cutaneous nature in the tropics. Have you had any association with a native woman?"

A silence followed the doctor's query. His patient was laughing quietly.

"Of course, doctor—I'm rather a connoisseur in that line."

"H'm. It's a formal question I have to ask almost every day, and I can assure you a negative reply would almost dumbfound me. Now I've a more specialised query to make. Have you ever had anything to do with any of these Mohn girls from down-river? There's a colony of them near Pak Thong."

"Yes, I knew one from that district."

"Ah."

A glimmer of secret knowledge passed across the doctor's features. The piscine dulness of his eyes

was succeeded by a new flame of interest ; a burning sense of discovery betrayed itself in his manner. To Hartwell the metamorphosis was hilariously clear. It was obvious that the old man had found his clue in the realms of the venereal. A pocket lecture on the dangers of promiscuous associations with native women would follow. A mercurial prescription would then be written out . . .

"I'll see you to-morrow afternoon. Three o'clock. It's important. A consultation may be necessary. I can tell you nothing definite now."

Quelling his surprise at this postponement of judgement, Hartwell rose to go.

"Righto doctor."

It was typical and old Thoroghgood should require twenty-four hours to search for a plausible diagnosis !

*

*

*

TWENTY-FOUR hours later the Chinese 'boy' again showed Hartwell into the doctor's surgery. At his patient's entry Thoroghgood got up from his chair with a smile of sycophantic brilliance. An index-card awaited his attention on the desk. He was not alone. From his seat near the window a bald-headed man surveyed Hartwell dispassionately with prominent red-rimmed eyes. Thoroghgood explained in soft tones—

"This is Doctor Schwartz. I've taken the liberty of consulting him about your case. I should like him to examine the rash . . ."

Hartwell shook hands with the specialist, a new arrival in the city, with a reputation as an

authority on skin diseases.

"I put myself in your hands, Herr Doctor."

"Goot. We will do our best, Mister Hartwell. You will undress, please."

The two physicians busied themselves with medical instruments while Hartwell unclothed. Schwartz now bustled to and fro with professional élan. Sometimes he would throw a guttural, authoritative ejaculation at Thoroghgood. His bald head bobbed up and down over the surgery sinks. Hartwell watched him, impressed by such apparent capability. Such Teutonic fire caused Thoroghgood to appear a mummified, phlegmatic figure in the background. Wearing rubber-gloves the specialist came forward.

"Now we are ready, Mister Hartwell. But first I would like to make a leedle questionnaire. The doctor, he tells me you have known one of the women from Pak Thong. Dat is so, is eet not?"

"Yes, doctor."

"These women—you call them Mohns, hein?"

Hartwell smiled at the regional classification.

"All women are the same to me, doctor."

"Ach so! But eet is important in this case, Mister Hartwell. You have known her vairy well?"

"Very."

"I understan'. Now permit me..."

The gloved hands crept down Hartwell's spine with grave precision. The doctor breathed heavily, his face a knowledgable mask. Eagerly Thoroghgood watched the examination. Suddenly Schwartz

jerked his head sideways to put a question.

"You have no pain, Mister Hartwell?"

"No, doctor."

"Your fingers and legs—there is anæsthesia sometimes—there is numbness here."

"That's right, doctor. I often have numbness where the rash is."

"There is frequent fever, my friend tells me. Permit me to see your forefinger and thumb!... So."

He motioned to Thoroghgood excitedly.

"You see, hein? The metacarpal..."

Their words were lost to Hartwell's hearing.

"...hyperæmia...vesication..."

The two physicians became silent. The stillness of the room was broken only by the mutterings of the syces gambling in the street below. Shrilly their words drifted through the windows in a staccate cascade of sound. Hartwell scanned the eyes of his examiners. He saw fear and excitement reflected therein.

Then the beating of his own heart obliterated all other sounds and sensations. The specialist was speaking. His voice was low and grave.

"Eet is serious, Mister Hartwell."

"Tell me——"

"Eet is leprosy."

"God!"

"Eet it all right, Mister Hartwell. There is no need for any paneeec. Eet is vairy unpleasant, yes, but eet is not desperate. We can cure leprosy..."

"You don't mean that."

"I mean eet sincerely, Mister Hartwell. My friend, Doctor Thoroughgood will agree. We have modern methods."

"Modern methods for leprosy ! Ha ! Ha ! You are being kind, doctor."

The room was filled with his hysteria. Thoroughgood rose and placed his rubber-gloved hand across his patient's shoulders. He spoke rapidly with forced cheerfulness.

"The old-fashioned ideas about leprosy were ludicrous. We have new treatments—chaulmoogra and other palliative oils. We have an excellent leper hospital in the north—one of the best in the East. There have been European patients there before, patients whose general condition has immensely improved in a short period. Your case is a comparatively clear one. You have associated with one of these Mohns from Pak Thong—she is obviously a contact from the small leper colony nearby. The virus is there but the ailment can be cut short. A cure is possible if you choose to follow the treatment Dr. Schwartz is about to recommend. We both, however, advise immediate segregation..."

"My God, doctor...I can't do it. Isolation would drive me mad—there's the stigma..."

"My dear Hartwell, that's out-of-date rubbish. Nowadays there is no stigma attached to leprosy."

"You're being kind again, doctor. At the bottom of your hearts you must both contemplate my case with horror and loathing. You needn't trouble to contradict me—I saw the pity and the

terror in your eyes from the start. Be frank and admit that I'm your most serious case for years. My life is finished—you know that."

"Come, come, Mister Hartwell. You are being hysterical and pessimistic. Give them three months patience in the asylum—the hospital in the north, then you will be a new man. Theh ! Soon we will laugh at the leprosy ! I suggest you give up your work immediately. The northern express eet leaves in two days. Doctaire Thoroggood has inquired—he will make the arrangements with the authorities. The treatment must commence quick."

Hartwell walked across to the window. A ring of syces on the footpath below were dicing for satangs ; a rickshaw-coolie was bargaining with a vendor of sweetmeats. A pigeon fluttered over a bin of refuse...the commonplace sights forced themselves on his mind.

"Is segregation essential ?" he asked suddenly

"It is most advisable. There is hardly any alternative."

"Eet is most necessary."

"Very well. You will know my decision this evening. I'm grateful for the trouble you've both taken. Good afternoon."

*

*

*

SINCE he had reached the age of seven, Lok Yin had delivered the evening newspaper at Nai Hartwell's house with inherent Chinese zeal and punctuality. Nai Hartwell was a kind man who sometimes gave him *cumshaw*. His bungalow was

a small one, down an obscure lane, but the flowers in the compound were so beautiful that they often caused Lok Yin to pause and gaze at them. The faces of the tall sunflowers at dusk reminded him of laughing human countenances. There was also a small pond in which a score of golden carp manoeuvred among the symmetrical petals of pink and yellow lotus blooms. And a pair of nightjars would invariably greet him, rising from their dust bath beneath the tapering casuarina's shade.

But to-night Lok Yin could see no birds. Their purring cluck was nowhere to be heard. As he approached with the bag of newspapers under his arm, he looked up into the foliage of the mango-tree beside the bungalow porch. Something strange was hanging from the lowest branch. . .

Lok Yin trembled and fled down the lane in terror.



XIII. MAN'S AUTUMN

WHEN schoolmistress Irma, a distant cousin, returned to "God's Own Country" she alluded to Henry Pintwell as a "no-account cuss," and his family she described as the biggest set of mouldwarps she had ever come across. It seemed that Eleanor Pintwell—a lean, rock-featured woman—was a reg'lar Xantippe towards her husband, while Clara Porter, that's Eleanor's sister, was a reg'lar downtrodden Abigail. Of course she hadn't ever had a cent, but in return for her keep she did a lot of the housework at the little villa in Putney, where the constant effluvia of cabbage-water just bowled one over. And the Pintwell progeny—three of the noisiest, most beatable tads God ever made—treated poor Clara like dirt, and Eleanor herself wasn't any too sisterly with her. But it was Henry who really roused Irma's pity. Poor Henry! There he sat, wearing his quaint little skull-cap, mouse-quiet before the fire, a crippled rheumatic. The little skull cap would have made anyone laugh, but Henry didn't care... After so many years spent, topi-clad under the warm Burma skies, his bald head just couldn't stand the English winter draughts. And he wore a velvet smoking-jacket, and read the *Times* all morning until tiffin and siesta time. When Eleanor snapped virulently at him for letting

his tea grow cold or for not doing up one of his fly-buttons, he just mumbled back meekly like an ever faithful, badly-treated terrier.

Oh, he was an innocent old Victorian. Poor Henry Pintwell !

*

*

*

IN the little house at Putney Henry Pintwell sat placidly before the brightly glowing fire. It was Sunday afternoon ; Eleanor and Clara had gone to rest, and Eric and Alice had removed their turbulent sophistication to the local badminton-club. And Ruth was away at the Wilbrahams. She had a crash on Tony Wilbraham ; perhaps one day she would marry him. God help Tony in his future hell ! Henry Pintwell chuckled. He was comfortable ; Eleanor for once had gratified his hesitantly expressed wish for a currie-tiffin. It was not the sort of currie he had been accustomed to in his Burmese-Siamese days—that woman at Bhamo knew how to make them !—but it awakened some pleasant memories in the eating. It could not have been wholly insipid either, since it gave him postprandial hiccoughs as a good currie always did. It had made him talkative, too, until Ruth had caused him to retreat snail-like into his usual silence by remarking—

“For God’s sake, Pop, let’s have less of the old Moulmein pagoda business.”

Ruth was a bad-mannered, precocious girl and Eric and Alice were little better. The trouble was they didn’t wallop children enough at school nowadays. In his time a proper code of manners

was instilled by the cane's edge. He recollected how old Monsieur Pontaye—"Crabs," they called him—had put the fear of God and Gallicism into him by delineating, previous to exercising his expert flagellant powers, a neat bull's eye on his trousers. He had always made the mark with a piece of blue chalk and his aim was painfully accurate. That was a long time ago; he must have been fifteen or sixteen then—only last week he had read in the *Times* a reference which aroused in him an incredible sadness. He was not much of a man for poetic stuff, but the phrase had rhymed in his head insistently, something about—

"Man's autumn, the avenue lined with over-blown roses. . ."

Now, as his glance wandered from the tongues of flame in the fire, through the chintz-curtained window, to the vista of browning chestnut trees at the other side of the avenue, the sense of sadness returned forcefully. He realised fully his irrevocable senility. He had been old for many years—not so old in time as in another sense. His life was over, had been over for a long time, ever since his retirement in fact. It was not his rheumatism nor his lumbago, nor even the English climate, which was responsible for this environmental age without a name. It had been created by Eleanor and Clara, though he sometimes regarded Clara as a twin-soul where suffering was concerned, in spite of the fact that she could be really sarcastically unpleasant to him at times, particularly when Eleanor had been rowing her. Poor spinsterish

Clara ! That epitome of sterility ! And it was the life itself which had defeated him. The eternal sameness of it, ranging from the Sunday joint to the fortnight at Eastbourne in August. If Heaven upheld the ritual of Sunday joints, Henry Pintwell decided he would immediately take the other turning. And then there were the children. Dominated as they were by Eleanor, they had seldom anything in common with him, though Ruth's cupboard love was unmistakable since the question of attractive clothes and Tony Wilbraham had appeared on the horizon. Had he ever had any affection for them ? Or for his wife Eleanor ? A shower of crisp golden leaves pattered against the window. *Autumn, the avenue lined with over-blown roses...*

*

*

*

As a rule Henry Pintwell became drowsy immediately after his mid-day meal, but to-day his thoughts had assumed an abnormal clarity and divergence. From Monsieur Pontaye's piece of blue chalk they wandered to the vision of Lottie Collins singing *Ta ra ra Boun dee ay* at that delightfully Rabelaisian music hall across the river. He was a young man then, straw-hatted and in the spring of life. He recollected another occasion. That was the night when he was walking home at a late hour to his lodgings in Battersea. It was raining lightly. He had had a good meal with a friend at a Soho restaurant. A rhythmical sense of well-being surged through his body as he walked vigorously along the wet pavements. The

streets were almost deserted. Suddenly he became aware of a girl riding a bicycle a few yards away from him. She was neat-figured and drew from him something deeper than a momentary glance. Soon she surprised him by dismounting. He walked on slowly for a few paces before looking back. Then he saw that she was occupied with the bicycle lamp. Acting on a sudden impulse he retraced his steps and accosted her with an offer of assistance. Her face rather than the recalcitrant lamp absorbed his attention. It was oval and palely pretty. Her carmined, kissable lips made his pulses throb with a pleasant abnormality. In a slightly foreign but wholly delightful voice she accepted his offer of help, at the same time laughing with attractive helplessness. The acquaintance ripened while he lingered over repairs: the barriers of convention were broken. She was a Roumanian with lodgings a few streets way. Wheeling her machine he accompanied her home through the drizzle...

Henry Pintwell chuckled when he recalled the fact that the walk in question was a prelude to a fortnight's stay in the girl's rooms. After all these years he failed to remember her name; but the beauty of her body and the sanitary luxuriance of her bathroom remained fresh in his brain.

*

*

*

THEN there was the day he had been summoned to the Colonial Office, with his credentials and his birth-certificate. He vividly re-lived the interview which followed--The stiff medical examination

and the eventual arrival of his first-class ticket to Rangoon. His job was to be that of Assistant District Officer in an obscure district on the Burma-Siam border. And then the voyage out. Gibraltar with its dust-cloaked Alameda gardens, the chirping of crickets, a bathe at Catalan Bay... Marseilles, the Vieux Port, a negro pimp, a roomful of nude courtesans... Suez, the *guili guili* men, the bumboats, the fierce sunlight wounding the vision... Sinai, with its desolate, sepia-tinted grandeur... and finally Rangoon itself. What could he remember of Rangoon?—the pot-bellied chetties, the fierce-faced Pathans, the slant-eyed Malays, the dark-skinned, long-haired Tamils, the half-naked, grinningly orthodox Chinese, machine-patterned from the womb, and the gaily-clad Burmese, with their oiled locks crowned in yellow silk *gaungbaungs*. His first impression of the Burmese and the Siamese had not been a favourable one—short legs, simian faces, betel-stained mouths, sweat-illumined checks. Soon, however, he grew to appreciate the prognathous handsomeness of the men and the lithe, Polynesian graces of the women. After six months he had been ordered to a region in the Shan States. It was lonely there: sometimes for weeks on end he met no one but a time-worn foreign missionary and his climate-withered wife. But a trip eastward to Chiangmai in Laos was an enchanting experience. There were good fellows at the club there, sun-baked teak wallahs, Danes and Englishmen. It was near Chiangmai he had met that burly timberman,

what was his name ?—who had initiated him into the customs of the Karien and Laotian women. *Glorious Memories !*

Henry Pintwell chuckled again. He could not sleep to-day. Outside in the avenue little eddies of fading leaves chased each other fantastically along the edges of the pavements.

How many girls had he lived with in those far-off days ? There was Periya, whose lips were liable to provoke the most righteous, and Samruan of the ivory teeth, and, most memorable of all, Lamai, whose breasts were lovelier than pink lotuses. And then, with a clearer, sadder sense of reminiscence, Henry Pintwell remembered the outcome of Lamai's first sojourn at his isolated bungalow. She had been seated under the *punkah* one evening, smoking a cheroot wrapped in palm leaf, an exotic flower thrust in her neatly-coiled, glossy black hair. How picturesque she had looked in her dark silk trousers and short yellow coatee ! Then he realised her unusual silence, for she was not a moody type at any time. A little later she told him of her condition. His re-action to the news was inwardly a turbulent one, though outwardly he strove to divert his thoughts by caressing her enchantingly sensuous lips. Lovely Lamai ! And the child had arrived one violent night in the rainy season. He vividly pictured the scene—the Laos midwife and Lamai's betel-chewing mother, her mouth a red gap in her countenance, seated with inscrutable calmness beside the moaning girl. Intermittently, from the corner of the verandah, a

tokké lizard emitted its strange throaty cry, and, with spasmodic phosphorescence, a pair of fire-flies flickered above the mosquito-net where his first-born was coming into being. . .

Vacantly Henry Pintwell looked through the chintz-curtained window at the sparrows quarrelling in the hedge.

She had been a darkly beautiful child with features rather European than Eurasian. Towards the end of his third *chukka* he had brought her down to Bangkok to be educated at an Ursuline Convent. He recollected how Lamai had sobbed tempestuously at the parting.

Soon afterwards he had gone home on leave. The Boer War followed and a bullet in his thigh. It seemed ludicrous that so small a thing as a bullet, discharged by a bearded sniper at Magersfontein, should have turned him into a helpless valetudinarian for over two years, causing his marriage to her, his night nurse, a pre-possessing, self-willed woman at that time; but, as Henry Pintwell reflected, a woman would have to be devilishly ugly not to look a trifle comely in a nurse's uniform. Owing to his wound and to Eleanor's refusal to go east, he had been transferred to a job in the London area. It was from then onwards that his life had dwindled to an age without a name. Three children Eleanor had borne him dutifully—Ruth and Eric and Alice. And seven thousand miles away there was that darkly beautiful child, his first-born, at the Ursuline Convent. He had not heard of her or of Lamai for many years, but he

had endowed the latter with a liberal sum for herself and the girl. For a long time he wondered about the child. Had the Ursuline sisters turned her into a schoolmarm?—an Asiatic reproduction of his Yankee cousin Irma. Or had she married a Siamese? As a husband, a decent, middle-class, foreign-educated Siamese was preferable to an unstable Eurasian. And Lamai? He could not imagine her sinuous loveliness a prey to middle-age. Life was funny, thought Henry Pintwell, and he chuckled again noisily. A moment later the dining-room door opened and Clara Porter bustled in. She was carrying the tea-tray.

* * *

"It's five o'clock," she announced decisively, placing the cups on the table.

"You've had a long sleep, Henry."

Her brother-in-law smiled. Poor Clara!—that acme of sterility!

* * *
* * *
*

XIV. BEDTIME STORY

["—and then the Major gave us a graphic account of a struggle he had with a wounded bear. I privately wished that the bears would win sometimes on these occasions ; at least they wouldn't go vapouring about it afterwards."]

—SAKI.]

IT was late afternoon, and from the Bruin homestead the view was superb. It always thrilled Papa Bruin to gaze across the long Sind valley at this hour, when the sunlight was pleasantly warming to the body and his last meal in the processes of being digested satisfactorily. On these occasions he could see Mount Kolahoi, magnificent amidst its girdle of billowy cloud, and away to the west above the rim of conifers, the summit of Haramukh, a godly mountain where the Mi-Go dwelt. Sometimes the Karakoram, a limitless ocean of snowy, undulating peaks, was visible and it was difficult to tell where the mountain tops ended and the firmament of cumuli began.

Papa Bruin yawned and patted his wide girth complacently. He knew he had eaten too many apricots that afternoon when he and his family had made a predatory excursion into the Kashmiri's orchard. How they had fled away ! those poor, affrighted, sackcloth-clad rustics. The apricots and the succulent shoots of the young trees made

a feast of immeasurable delight. A long draught of water from a crystal-clear mountain streamlet had afterwards quenched everybody's thirst.

Papa Bruin stretched himself and looked around for his family. He guessed that his wife was preparing his soft bed amongst the conifers—a good, dutiful partner she was, even though she was dominating in character and inclined too often to overlay her new-born offspring. Two sons they had with them, and a soft-padded moody daughter who displayed a piebald coat and was prone to be furtive of eye. To roll about happily in the sunshine was seldom her habit. Papa Bruin never understood his daughter; he was even a little afraid of her. She was at an awkward age, incessantly prinking herself to attract all the he-bears from the neighbouring mountain-side. He supposed it was only the machinations of nature, but it frequently astonished him to see the creature arraying herself with necklaces formed of the petals of jonquils and mountain primulas. That wasn't the way Mrs. Bruin had captured him——no: that he had needed any enticing!

Now he heard familiar grunts emanating from the trees nearby and he soon saw his two sons coming towards him. He felt proud to be the parent of these sturdy handsome creatures. They were very youthful and looked their best in their new fur coats which shone resplendently in the sunlight. Their eyes, too, glistened with health, except on those days when the pair over-ate of bark and apricots. Then their orbs invariably

became as yellow as the robes of the Tibetan monks who passed through the valley from Leh. After such gluttony they would place their paws in agony on their paunches and their tongues would be silent in great misery.

"Well, sons, yonder is a sight you couldn't beat in all the world," said Papa Bruin proudly. He pointed with his paw to Mount Haramukh where the first roseate rays of sunset were apparent on the immaculate snows. The three of them stared mutely at the splendid scene. Such supreme moments were amongst the most valued joys of the bear kingdom. Then the younger son turned to his father ingratiatingly.

"Tell us a story, pa," he begged, linking his arm in that of his parent.

"Tell us about the time you scared the lady missionary in the gorge near Sonamarg and how she dropped her topi and how Ma ate it and was nearly sick unto death," suggested the other brother.

The younger son objected.

"No pa. Tell us somethin' excitin', like when you had the encounter with the fierce Major from Peshawar."

"Okay lads. Come and sit by me. Snuggle up and be comfortable, it'll soon be getting chilly. I wonder where your mother is, and that bundle of vanity, your sister——"

"I saw her walking-out with the piebald fellow from the next valley."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Papa Bruin. "Well, I suppose its a case of two of a kind——"

still, I hope she's careful. One can never be too decorous in these matters."

"I'm gettin' sleepy, pa," said the younger son, impatiently, "an' if you don't tell us soon about the great fight you had with the fierce Major from Peshawar, I'll be dozin' off."

"Well, sons," said Papa Bruin, scratching a spot of bother under his armpit and settling himself into a comfortable posture, "you're quite at liberty to stop me if you've heard this before——"

"No, no, pa," chorused his offspring, "we wouldn't be so unfilial as to do a thing like that."

"Well," said Papa Bruin dramatically, "you may not be aware that our species is frowned upon in these parts and classified as vermin."

"A crying shame," interpolated the younger son indignantly.

Papa Bruin rubbed his paws together and continued :—

"We've never been popular in India. One of my friends, who performed for many years in a circus before making good his escape, once told me that we had relatives on the Bombay Stock Exchange who were frequently the object of the most vulgar, unmitigated abuse."

"Shame!" shouted the sons hotly. "We minorities must stick up for our rights. Is it British Imperialism again, pa?"

"Maybe, my lads. At all events these army sahebs can shoot us at will, but if they want to bring down a miserable duck on the Wular Lake, or hook a wretched trout, they must first obtain a

special licence. We've got no protection whatever. Yet I've heard there are nurseries for trout in Srinagar. Just fancy !”

“Its not right, pa, its preferential treatment.”

“If it weren't for our inherent fecundity, we'd have been wiped out long ago,” said Papa Bruin solemnly.

“What does ‘fecundity’ mean, pa ?” asked the younger son.

“You'll know, my lad, when you grow up—— Now where was I ?”

“The fight with the fierce Major——”

“Ah, yes.”

“What are Majors like, pa ?”

“They are a species of human as common as cuckoos in this valley in springtime. I once saw six of them together near Sonamarg but they are not always so gregarious. The particular specimen I met had cheeks the colour of mellow maple leaves and a paunch not unlike my own.”

The elder son grunted with amusement.

“Above his lip was a growth of fur which differed from our own in that it was diligently waxed. His eyes were bloodshot and beady and arrogant from partaking of the red beverage they call port vine ; his legs tapered away thinly like the growth of a very young sapling.”

“It must be fun squeezin' a Major, pa,” said the young son ruminatively.

Having assuaged some further trouble in the armpit Papa Bruin went on calmly with his narrative——

"I met this fellow by a narrow track in the forest above the village called Chatragool. He had a big *bandobast*—nine ponies, a Punjabi bearer, a Goanese cook, a couple of guides and a handful of Kashmiri donkey-men. When they saw me emerging suddenly from the undergrowth they all bolted away in alarm, except the Major, who snorted bellicosely and stood his ground. I'll say he deserves full marks for bravery. Before he could unsling his weapon, I was upon him. I felt frisky at the time but in no way blantly aggressive. It was really out of self-defence that I came to grips with him. I didn't relish the idea of being a target for that rifle. I saw one of your uncles killed that way—a horrible death! We struggled together on the ground and I showed great restraint by keeping my claws withdrawn. I felt the Major's hot breath full in my face—— Then I had an inspiration. I twisted the barrel of the Major's rifle. I don't wish to boast of my strength, but its no exaggeration to say that the barrel resembled the coils of a snake when I had finished with it. The Major was completely at my mercy after that."

"What foresight you showed, pa," commented the elder son.

"Don't interrupt," admonished the younger son petulantly.

Papa Bruin wiped his forehead with his paw. He found this storytelling a tiring business.

"I could have killed him with a gentle hug," he said, "but a brave adversary like the Major deserved a better fate."

"You were chivalrous, pa."

"It was not long after your mother had come into my life, my son, and her advent seemed strangely to soften my disposition. And you know how we males are definitely less dangerous—or should I say more soft-hearted?—than the females of our species. I felt sentimental at that moment. I gazed into the Major's distended eyes and I realised that perhaps he, too, had little ones to think of—it would have been the action of a gross brute to sever such a family link. It was beyond my powers to behave with such callousness. I unclasped the Major hurriedly and ran off into the undergrowth."

"But the Major may have known no woman, pa," said the younger son, his eyes wide with argument.

"Possibly, my son, he may have been a celibate, but he was brave as any man in Tartary and I have never regretted my action."

There was a commotion in the adjacent brushwood. A moment later Mrs. Bruin, a comely she-bear with a delectable fur, appeared before them. Her figure was still youthful and her movements agile. She surveyed her family with a measure of boredom.

"Has pa been pullin' that one about the fierce Major again?" she asked her sons sternly. "*My fight!*"

They all looked down in shamefaced silence. Papa Bruin was very obviously under his wife's paw.

"Where's that sister of yours?" she demanded imperiously.

"I saw her walking-out with the piebald from the next valley, Ma."

Mrs. Bruin shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what the younger generation is coming to," she grunted in disgust.



XV.—A CHARTED LIFE

THIS is a plain tale of an incident which occurred during the successful career of Rao Saheb X. Who, you will ask, was Rao Saheb X? I can only describe him from a one night's acquaintance with his portrait and the eulogies in an illuminated testimonial attached thereto. A brief meeting, but sufficient to convey the impression that the Rao Saheb was an individual who had led a conscientious, hardworking, philanthropic existence, having carried out his duties as a government official to perfection and earned the esteem of all his colleagues, besides receiving two medals of distinction—a most honourable, trustworthy gentleman (*vide* testimonial) this high official, akin, one might say to Caesar's wife. In appearance the Rao Saheb was also impressive. Tall, waxen of countenance and moustache, moypic, clad in flowing white draperies, he looked a man of deep intelligence, the type, one felt, who would studiously chew the cud of the political articles in the *Times of India*, yet wherewithal the sort of person one would instinctively trust to place a bet for one at the races, though it is very doubtful whether the Rao Saheb ever attended such a frivolous *milieu*.

I met the Rao Saheb—pictorially, of course—a couple of years ago. I was on a shikar trip in the mofussil with Colonel Bloome of the 4th Barse-

shires and Bewpot-Strumpleton of the I.C.S. We had secured permission to use the Government Circuit bungalow in an area renowned for its excellent shooting. After a heavy and successful day's sport we were glad of the solid comforts offered by the bungalow. The Khansama produced a most satisfactory meal, after which the three of us returned to the veranda for cigars and coffee. It was very pleasant there; the night was moonlit and the air heavy with the scent of jasmine and frangipani. Bloome was in his element after dinner dialectics, bordering on the higher metaphysics, being his *forte*. He was discoursing, if I remember aright, on blood pressure.

"A man's own fault entirely. You may have heard of Rentfoot-Birtwistle. He was with me at Patna in '06. His blood pressure——"

But Bewpot-Strumpleton was not listening. He had risen from his chair and had approached the wall a few yards away. Bloome and I watched him with surprise as he gazed fascinated in front of him.

"Now that's a most remarkable thing," announced Bewpot-Strumpleton, the light of his cigar visible in the dimly lit veranda.

"My dear fellow, what is remarkable about a wall?" enquired Bloome coldly.

"It has a chart on it," continued Bewpot-Strumpleton.

"Probably the rainfall averages of the P.W.D. or crop statistics" yawned the Colonel.

"Not at all," cried our friend from the shadows, "its the chart or graph of a man's life, told in terms

of his financial aggrandisement."

The Colonel glanced at me with mystification. "Its the life story of Rao Saheb X—a most human document," said Bewpot-Strumpleton. "Supposing, Bloome, you had started life as a drummer boy on one and six pence a week—with free washing—and your chart had been begun then, proceeding to register the ups and downs in your military career——"

"Let's see this tomfoolery," shouted Bloome, rising a little cholericly from his long chair. Together we joined Bewpot-Strumpleton in front of the chart. In the dim light the whole thing appeared neatly drawn and compiled with the utmost precision. We learnt that Rao Saheb X had started service on ten rupees a month and had reached his financial zenith when drawing a salary of eight hundred rupees per mensem preparatory to retirement. The graph, however, showed no continuous rise: there were stationary periods amounting to years in certain portions, and, what was most difficult to understand, a definite drop in the middle of the Rao Saheb's service. Why had this set back occurred?

"Its most puzzling," commented Bewpot-Strumpleton. "Why did the Rao Saheb sustain this misfortune in a seemingly blameless career? Was it a discrepancy in the petty cash? Or nepotism? Or lack of courtesy to a heavenborn? Or intrigue on the part of one of his colleagues? Or—but here's our friend himself!"

And there, just beyond the chart, was a gilt-

framed portrait of Rao Saheb X coupled with a testimonial from his many friends and fellow-officials. The picture, artistically, was a poor one copied woodenly from a photograph, but as is the case with many such efforts at portraiture, the wooden, photographic flatness rather magnified the sitter's features.

"A trustworthy, intelligent face," declared Bewpot. "Low blood pressure and opthalmia," grunted Bloome.

"The recipient of two medals and deeply respected by all who came in contact with him—generous to his inferiors—a man of deep culture and of the highest integrity," Bewpot read out sonorously.

Why, then, should the Rao Saheb have had that temporary misfortune in his middle years? All was obviously not plain sailing at that period of his life—

"What about a game of cut throat?" suggested Bloome as we returned to our chairs.

As he dealt out the cards I could see that Bewpot's heart was not in the game. His glance wandered continually to the shadows where the Rao Saheb's portrait was eerily discernible beyond that intriguing chart of his life. There was, it seemed, some hypnotic quality in that worthy, highly-esteemed and decorous countenance. It caused Bewpot-Strumpleton to revoke twice. It also upset my sleep that night, for I dreamt of the Rao Saheb as a mountaineer, climbing myopically to the peak of his desires, and sustaining a grievous fall half way up the incline——

I DID not see Bewpot-Strumpleton for nearly three months after our shikar trip. Then one day I ran into him in the bar of a Bombay club.

"You haven't forgotten our friend?" he shouted enthusiastically.

"Who?" I enquired blankly.

"The Rao Saheb, of course."

I laughed to think that Bewpot should have remembered that little incident of the charted life, but I realised then that Bewpot had always had a Sherlock Holmesish reputation in the I.C.S. for getting to the bottom of the matter. His enemies in the service invariably insisted that he would have done well as a private detective in matrimonial cases round London or Brighton. So I asked him, without surprise, if he had traced Rao Saheb X.

Bewpot, ordering two beers, struck an impressive attitude. "Our mutual friend," he said, "died many years ago, but the circumstances of his life have become abundantly clear to me of late. I was successful in finding out the whereabouts of eleven of the Rao Saheb's offspring, and their account of the worthy man's life coincided to a great degree."

I could clearly visualise Bewpot in his role as private detective—interrogating the Rao Saheb's many relatives and meticulously recording their evidence.

"Then what caused the very definite setback in his middle years," I enquired with interest. •

"The lapse," pronounced Bewpot dramatically,

"was caused by Augustine Anselmo Resurrection da Lima."

"That sounds like the title of an incumbent of an archbishopric," I said, mystified, as I waited for Bewpot to consume his beer.

"Augustine—commonly called Resurrection by his fellow menials (continued Bewpot)—was a Goanese servant of the Rao Saheb's. It would appear conclusive, from the weight of the evidence I have gathered, that Resurrection was a wine-bibber and a thoroughly bad character. Even the Rao Saheb was tempted at times to discard his lamb-like complacency and to call the fellow a *badmash*, a *goonda* or a *jungliwallah* according to his mood. Matters came to a climax when this thorn in the flesh was found to have appropriated several of the Rao Saheb's new dhoties for resale in the bazar. The Rao Saheb having had a tiring day—and he was preparing to entertain the Collector and his wife at a garden party the following week-end—thereupon gave notice that he would dispense with Resurrection's services at the end of the week. He let the fellow know that his decision was irrevocable. Nothing would induce him to retain a thief to sully the upright atmosphere which all citizens associated with his house and family. Can you not see the Rao Saheb's bespectacled indignant eyes aflame with unaccustomed anger? As a responsible Government official he had a position of dignity to keep up. Resurrection bowed meekly before his master's decision.

Alas for the Rao Saheb (Have another beer.

Two beers, Roy !) Resurrection was a creature of much cunning and resource. He planned his revenge insidiously on the spot. And he had not long to wait for its accomplishment."

* * *

"OUR scene"—continued Bewpot, his dramatic relish intensified by the palatable coolth of his third beer—"now changes to the Rao Saheb's garden party in honour of his burra saheb, the Collector, and his wife. It was indeed a big tamasha with over a hundred guests present—wealthy sheths and a sprinkling of local Durbar Sahebs and all the lesser Government officials, shristidars, kamdars, fozdars, babus, etc., all dressed in their whitest and bravest array. The Rao Saheb's wife, wearing her best sari, looked charming as she presided over the feeding arrangements. She had ordered the best confectionery from Bombay and the finest fruits from Kulu for the party. The Rao Saheb himself was standing nervously expectant near the bungalow porch, awaiting signs of the Collector's arrival. A big bouquet of roses and oleander and garlands of gilt had been placed ready for him to present to his gracious guests.

At last the big car swept up the drive and came to rest before the porch. The Rao Saheb and his wife went forward apprehensively to make their—shall be say—floral obeisance. (This beer does loosen the tongue !) The Collector stepped out of the car and received his garland which he acknowledged with an artificial smile and an air of vague

condescension. He was a pompous little man with the reputation of being unsympathetic towards his staff. His rotund, almost Junoesque wife smiled demurely as the garland was placed with difficulty around her neck by the Rao Saheb's diminutive wife. ("Very good of you. Such glorious blossoms!")

Then the Rao Saheb proceeded to hand the large bouquet to Mrs. Collector—and an extraordinary thing happened. When the bouquet was a couple of feet away from that gracious lady's face, a large, bright paper snake suddenly uncoiled itself and shot forward, striking the lady's nose. Mrs. Collector shrieked loudly and, white with amazement, the Rao Saheb gallantly gave her the support of his arm. Consternation reigned. The guests fairly buzzed with conversation. Some of them considered it had been a deliberate attempt against the British Raj. The Collector was undoubtedly the intended victim of terrorists. The paper snake surely contained poison or vitriol—Everyone had his own opinion on the matter, including our villain, Resurrection, who had gloated over the incident from his place of concealment amongst the hibiscus bushes.

As the excitement following upon this unorthodox incident diminished, the most prominent guests were introduced to the Collector, being led forth by the Rao Saheb like sheep for inspection. The Collector then seated himself ostentatiously in the circle of honour. The Rao Saheb deferentially offered him a cigarette from the silver-box he had

received as a token of his completion of thirty years of service. The Collector, who was discussing the bajri crop prospects with a local Rajah, took and lit the cigarette without acknowledgment. After a long and sustained puff he turned away to discuss further the agricultural conditions in the Rajah's state——

At that moment there was a flash and a muffled report. Everyone's gaze was drawn towards the Collector. It was observed that his cigarette had exploded and actually blown half out of his mouth. Consternation again reigned.

("A very jolly partee," someone said, "and quite out of the ordinaree.")

The Collector was seen to be scowling fiercely at his host.

"Your humour, Rao Saheb, is a little childish," he said loudly and scathingly, and the Rao Saheb felt his legs giving way beneath him from sheer terror. Two irremediable *faux pas* had been committed : he would be for ever in the black books of the Government. As he noticed the amusement sweeping over the faces of his guests—like sunlight over a blank wall—he inwardly desired the earth to open up and swallow him.

But worse was to follow—as our chuckling villain Resurrection knew only too well. Very shortly the Collector's wife was observed to draw forth her handkerchief hurriedly—a most pernicious smell seemed to have pervaded the lawn, a most foul and intolerable smell—certain sari-clad guests were seen to be on the verge of asphyxiation.

Soon the odour reached the Collector's table and he and the Rajah, reaching for their handkerchiefs, abruptly ceased discussing the nature of the sub-soils of the Deccan. With a haughty glance at the Rao Saheb, the Collector (who remembered the distinctive odour of stink-bombs from his public school days) summoned his wife and angrily proceeded to take his departure. As a result of this party the Rao Saheb was sent to an isolated district and deprived of several allowances. But it takes more than that to keep a good man back. Within five years our hero was on top again, in a more responsible post as Dewan of a respectably-sized native State where, with general acclamation and a purse of gold from the Rajah, he eventually retired from service.

So our tale has the happy ending which all good fairy stories should have," mused Bewpot over his empty mug.

"Have a beer," I said. "Boy! bring two more beers."

And Strumpleton Sahib, thirsty from narration, awaited the nectar eagerly.

* * *

*

XVI. PERAHERA

I FIRST saw her during the Perahera festival at Kandy. She was seated meditatively by herself on a bench beside the lake, a gentle-looking old lady, diminutive and mouse-like in her sustained repose. Her black lace dress was quaintly old fashioned in its waist line. She wore a hat with a flamboyant girdle of roses about its crown, a florid gesture which made me suspect her of being of Eurasian stock. I was satiated with the festival at the time. My eyes were dazzled by the abundance of the Maligawa tuskers, gorgeously caparisoned, gleaming in the light of the coruscating torches, my ears deafened by the incessant throbs of distant drums and the booming cannon honouring the Kandyan chiefs. I decided to sit beside the little old lady and to content myself by drinking in the moon's loveliness on the placid milk-white lake. I could see a planet reflected vividly in the water, and Sirius, green as grass, loomed brilliantly above the gold-mohur tree beside the bench.

I sat down. The bench was roomy and not uncomfortable. I said 'good-evening' politely to the little old lady and she bowed austere-ly in acknowledgment of my salutation. She seemed self-possessed and quite unsurprised at my advent. Then she turned and addressed me, breaking the silence with a thin, reedy voice.

"You're a tourist," she said, the sallow peakiness of her countenance lighting up into sudden animation.

"I suppose I am," I replied, hating the idea of being taken for a quick-transit, accipitrine, glove-trotter. It seemed to me that the term 'tourist' was especially derogatory in Ceylon, where the card-selling touts, the jewel-vendors and the rickshaw-wallahs have attained full Egyptian standards in their pestering of the gullible visitor.

"I guessed you weren't a local planter," she said in a tone of relief, "for they don't mix much with us folk. Most of 'em creepers and little masters wouldn't be seen dead with an old lady on a bench on Perahera night. Of course, if it was a case of a young lady——"

My companion smiled roguishly. It was then that I fancied that she smelt very mildly of arrack. She had, I imagined, been celebrating the festival on her own, enjoying a drink in mouse-like quietude by the lakeside. She continued somewhat more animatedly.

"I've never cared much for the English—they're so afraid of being unconventional."

"What nationality are you?" I asked her bluntly.

She chuckled to herself.

"I'm eight annas to the rupee, half a wog, as the little masters say. But I'm not ashamed of being Eurasian. One of my Dutch ancestors was governor of Galle, and my mother's people come of good Kandyan stock. We're not quite the

same as the ordinary Indian half-caste, the tommy's relic."

"Of course not," I agreed, realising the old lady's understandable pride in her burgher origin. As I glanced at her clear-cut moonlit features I saw her draw a flask from her handbag. She apologised charmingly.

"I'll take a drink with your permission. This Perahera is a thirsty occasion. I get tired looking at the tuskers, they're such dry animals, they make one thirsty. Have you tried our native liquor? It's excellent for rheumatism."

I politely refused her offer of the flask. She drank copiously herself, wiping her lips afterwards with a bright pink handkerchief.

"I feel better now," she said. "What were we talking about? The English, wasn't it? They're too straitlaced for words. And I should know, since my son married an English hussy—a publican's daughter in a place called Yorkshire."

"That's very interesting," I remarked encouragingly.

The old lady's eyes hardened. The cast of her countenance became almost rigid with hatred. She was unsettled and calmed herself with the solace of another drink.

"She was a bad one," she announced impressively. "Her name was Miriam and I was the cause of her death."

I started visibly. The old lady noticed my shocked surprise. "You think I'm tiddly? Maybe I am. After all, its permissable at Perahera, like

a celebration at New Year's Eve. But its true about Miriam. I was the cause of her death. I feel I can confide in you—you must be broad-minded and of a generous nature if you deign to sit down beside a lonely old lady on a night like this." She chortled, a little bibulously.

"My son Jan was a bright boy. He won a scholarship at the university and they sent him home to England to learn something, geology or biology, I forget which. He was handsome like his Dutch forefathers and I was proud of him. I've seen tourist women glance twice at him in Colombo streets. He was a good boy, too, and kind to his mother. As a student he used to send me presents of mangosteens and durians and once he gave me a piece of jade. That's what a mother appreciates. I didn't like those folk sending him to England at all. If he'd gone to the Hague, I shouldn't have minded so much, that's where his forbears came from. So they sent him off at Government expense on one of their big ships and I waved farewell to him at the docks—excuse me."

The old lady had hiccupped. I pretended not to hear the sound.

"He wasn't home three months before this Miriam ensnared him. They got married and he studied less and less. She dragged him down to her level, I could tell so much from the letters he sent me, though sometimes he didn't write to me for months. He took her up to London to a locality named Pimlico, not a very respectable neighbourhood I dare say. She used to bring him

to places called corner houses, in fact, in every way, her influence was bad for Jan. After two years he brought her back here to these parts. He hadn't earned his license at the English university, and the folk here thought he was a failure. However, they gave him a charity job on one of the estates, pathology or geology of the natives, I think it was. The money was poor—no better than a head Kangani's—and the life was lonely. I hated this Miriam from the moment I saw her coming down the gangway. She was pretty I'll admit, but she was hard and cruel like a snake. She despised me from the start. She once cut me dead in the street in Colombo. I wasn't good enough to be her mother-in-law. I was only eight annas in the rupee. Then she took up with a young Scotch creeper on an estate near Kandy. She was tired of Jan and his low wages. She left him and ran off with the other man. Jan was miserable. I tried to comfort him. He began to go to the toddy shops. His lovely handsome face grew coarse, and the change in six months was terrible. Excuse me. I've a nasty hiccough."

My companion took out the bright pink handkerchief to cover her confusion. Another pull at the flask ensued. She glanced at me dramatically.

"He drank himself to death in less than a year. It was in the church at his funeral that the idea came to me about Miriam. I had to do something; I loathed her so much I couldn't get her out of my mind. My appetite went and my health began to suffer from my hatred. I was sitting in

the front pew near Jan's coffin—they were playing his favourite hymn, *The King of Love*,—when I saw the big yellow candles over it and I remembered a story a Jaffna Tamil told me when I was a little girl. He said to me that, if one wanted a person to die, one had just to make their image in wax and put a needle into the imaginary heart every day for a month. I couldn't pray any more after I thought of that. They played melancholy music and I watched them carry Jan's coffin and put it in the earth. But I was in a daze, thinking of that Miriam. When I got home in the evening I went to the 'bazar' and bought a dozen of the yellow candles. I felt like a small schoolboy secretly buying cigarettes. That night I shut all the doors and I moulded the wax into the shape of Miriam. I worked like a real witch and the evil was somehow enjoyable. I put patches of cochineal for Miriam's eyes and a piece of blackened sponge for her hair. The image was quite like her, for she was pretty in a dollish way. After everything was ready I took a big darning needle and I pierced the place where the heart should be. I pierced it every day for two months. It did me a lot of good. My appetite came back and I felt energetic and even forgot about Jan's death. I was quite confident that Miriam would die soon and I wasn't far out in my expectations. She and her Scotch lover were going to be married now that Jan was out of the way. But they reckoned without me and my candles. The Jaffna Tamil was right. On St. Andrew's night, after celebrating

the Club Ball, they went over the *Khud* in their car. Mariam was killed."

The old lady looked at me triumphantly. The effects of the arrack were now clear in her eyes.

"Do you really believe that you were instrumental in killing her?" I asked her incredulously.

"I'm sure of it," she answered.

"Do you think the method is often successful?"

"Always, but it hurts the doer as much as the victim in the end. It takes it out of you terribly once the thing's done. I'd be afraid to do it again. I won't allow a candle in my bungalow now. I'm sometimes terrified to look at the altar in church."

By now the brilliance of the Perahera was waning. The processions of merry-makers were retreating to the warren of streets in old Kandy. The blaze of catherine wheels had ceased. The tom-toms were muffled and distant.

"It's growing chilly. Will you have a drink?" inquired the little old lady. At the same time I saw a glimpse of fear in her eyes, for a gang of *podians*, brimming over with mischief, was approaching. Garrulous, and light of foot as frisking heifers, the youths danced round my companion teasingly, the fanatical spirit of the Perahera still persistent in their bronzen limbs.

"*Arracku bone ummandi!*" (Drunken old sot) they shouted gleefully at her, and I could see she was thoroughly afraid. I raised my stick and caught one of the lads a resounding crack on the legs. The others ran away in confusion. The old lady turned to me.

"I'm greatly obliged to you, sir," she said.



XVII. ROSES OF OMAR

IT was high summer when Khwajah Nizami of Samarcand arrived with his caravan at Naisapur. On all sides the lavish bounty of the Persian harvest was in evidence. Apricots, magnificent in their tawny abundance, drooped heavily from verdant boughs; the full-blown blossoms of rose and jasmine everywhere carpeted the sun-baked earth, and the doves in their cotes, saturated with sunlight, seemed to croon somnolently, in the noontide heat, of ripeness drawing nigh.

Khwajah Nizami ordered his men to halt at a place outside a garden wall, a place cool and sheltered from the penetrating midday glare. The camels sank superciliously to rest where the ground was soft with new-fallen rose leaves. A flagon of wine was brought forth and Khwajah with his friends, Rasool and Rustum, settled themselves in comfort on the sweet-smelling grass. Rasool, a rotund, jovial fellow with a moustache like a little white mouse, anticipated a pleasant sleep to offset the dusty journey from Shiraz, and Rustum, a prosperous official well-satisfied with life, found solace in lovingly fingering a favourite hookah. Khwajah alone was silent and preoccupied. For a long while he stared up into the tapestry of leaves formed by the branches of the fruit trees protruding over the garden wall.

"Khwajah, thy goblet is neglected," Rasool reminded him jestfully. Khwajah looked morose and made no answer.

He was—thought Rasool—exhausted by the heat and the long journey over the mountainous by-roads where the prospect of Ben Sabbah and his assassins had always loomed unpleasantly near in their thoughts. Rasool took a long draught of the cool wine and prepared himself for sleep. Perhaps, he meditated with a yawn, his friend Khwajah was only being poetic and mystical again, gazing in that queer fashion at the trees and the sky——

As for himself, he believed that the proper time for trees and flowers was when one became really old and drowsy and near to God. Khwajah, he knew, was a strange individual sometimes, almost ascetic in the aloofness of his manner——

Rasool's thoughts were interrupted by his friend's voice, a deep-toned, melancholy voice which compelled attention.

"And *He* said 'My tomb shall be in a spot where the north wind may scatter roses over it'," intoned Khwajah mysteriously, with such reverence that even Rustom looked up astonished from his well-loved hookah.

"Those were no idle words," continued Khwajah solemnly "for he lies buried here. Yonder stone, hidden under the rose leaves, covers his bones. He was my teacher and I loved him."

Rasool shuddered involuntarily. His little, white mouse-like moustache quivered nervously.

To have the bones of the dead, as it were, thrust at him while he was preparing for a much-needed sleep, was extremely unsettling. He wondered if Khwajah had the sunstroke.

"In what riddles speakest thou, Khwajah?" he enquired scornfully.

"That is Omar's tomb," said Khwajah placidly, pointing to a slab of stone covered with rose petals and a pattern of leaves from the adjacent fruit trees.

"Meanest Thou Omar, the Tent-Maker?" cried Rustom with interest.

"The same," answered Khwajah, "Omar Khayyam, the astronomer, the poet, the man of great wisdom—he who reformed the calendar for Malik Shah, he who loved roses——"

Rasool's desire for sleep had by now deserted him. His eyes were filled with a polemical glow.

"Was not this man Omar a wine-bibber?" he asked resentfully. "Was he not irreligious and hated by the people?"

"Hated he certainly was," agreed Khwajah. "Poetry, you should know, makes public characters of the hearts secrets. For that reason the Sufis feared and cast their opprobrium upon Omar. But he was a good man. He hunted well, and loved, and felt emotion at the sound of tavern music, and prized the perfume of flowers. What else can a man desire of life? I know well, Rasool, that thou art a prosaic being who looks askance at poetry and flowers. But did not the Prophet himself urge his *chela* to spend one of his coins

upon bread and the other upon a flower ?”

Once again Khwajah turned his gaze nostalgically towards Omar’s petal-covered tomb.

“He who loved roses,” he whispered reverently. “It was an obsession with him. Listen to this tale, my friends——”

*

*

*

“It was the occasion of the marriage at Shiraz of Yasmin, the eldest daughter of Nizam al Mulk, Grand Vizier at the Court of Malik Shah. The season was late spring, meet time for an espousal, my friends, for the nightingales were in song again and the water-courses gay with flowerlets of a myriad colours.

I accompanied my teacher, Omar, to the wedding, where he was appointed by his schoolfriend Nizam al Mulk as chief bard at the ceremonies. Many *Mithkals* of gold he received for his services, but Omar was never a mercenary fellow and he bestowed his rewards bounteously amongst the indigent hordes of Shiraz.

“I was privileged to share with him the most splendid quarters in the Grand Vizyr’s residence. For several nights before the wedding Omar worked frenziedly at the nuptial ode. His austere, worthy countenance was suffused with the gravity of inspiration ; it was a labour of love to him and our surroundings were propitious from every point of view. A divan on a balcony, milkwhite in the moonlight, a bowl of superb roses beside us, the breeze sighing gently through the poplars, and the nightingales—— I trust I do not bore thee.

Rasool, with these details. Ah ! thou dost not approve of ceremonial odes and such trimmings over the bonds of matrimony ? What sayeth the gipsies ?

‘In buying horses and in taking a wife, shut thine eyes tight and commend thyself to God.’ An unromantic, plebian philosophy, my bovine Rasool. Shame on thee !

“The nights, I say, were glamorous with nightingales and Omar was joyful in his task. His composition, it seemed to me, went exceeding well until the morning of the second day previous to the wedding. Then at our early repast of fruit and dates, I noticed a frown of some depth upon my teacher’s noble forehead.

“Thou has not slept well, Master ?” I muttered sympathetically to Omar. I saw him glance uncomfortably towards the doorways. He was most ill at ease, his eyes burdened with a great trouble.

“There are thieves in this dwelling,” he whispered to me hesitantly.

“In the Grand Vizyr’s abode !” I cried incredulously, “they have taken thy purse, Master ?”

“Nay, my son, they have stolen my roses in the darkness.”

Now that was a strange saying. What *badmash* would covet my Master’s bouquet when the flowers were as common in the land as ticks upon an Usbek’s chest ? Perchance, I ventured to point out, some admirer had sought the poet’s roses as a keepsake. But Omar remained unsettled and

unconvinced. His inspiration left him and he brooded all that day until the muezzins' cry rang out shrilly from the minarets at dusk. When prayers were over, and the moon rising beyond the Sultan's Turret, I suggest a draught of the old, familiar juice. My Master, with growing disquiet, refused the goblet, a very rare gesture on his part, my friends, for he was a great connoisseur.

"Come, fill the cups," he would cry, smacking his lips with grave delight, "and with Old Khayyam the Ruby Vintage drink." And he would expatiate lustily on the merits of the grape. It was a pleasure to drink wine with the Master, my friends. It was—like discussing theosophy with God.

Soon the sky above us was ablaze with stars. Every now and then the rampant flying-foxes would obliterate the moon's disc in their insane rushes, and sometimes a lonely flight of herons was visible against the blue vastness above the minarets.

Thereupon I turned to the Master and commented on the loveliness of the heavenly scene. I did not think that Omar could fail to be drawn into discussion of his favourite theme, Omar the astronomer, the wonder of whose predictions had spread to realms far beyond the Great Sea——

Alas! the starry prospect did not loosen his tongue. For some hours his taciturnity continued; he seemed incapable of being aroused from his dispondency. At last he spoke to me, his hands trembling nervously, his eyes melancholy and apprehensive.

"My son, thou wilt take vigil for the thief?"

"Yea, Master," I cried with gladness.

A little reassured, Omar solemnly bade me good-night and retired to his apartment.

I seated myself on the divan, the bowl of fragrant roses beside me, the fireflies flickering waywardly in the shadows. It struck me that maybe some prowling nightbird might be the thief of the flowers. A fantastic idea, my friends, but I was suspicious of all nature at that hour. Minutely I examined the approaches to the balcony; the strain upon my nerves was considerable. The morbid, incessant crying of the jackals without the city's walls only served to increase my uneasiness. I shuddered and tried at the same time to combat my fears. For a long time I lay vigilantly upon the divan in the jasmine-scented stillness, pressing my nails into the palms of my hand to drive away the sleep which I was afraid would steal over me. By that time I had become sceptical of there being any thief; the roses, I felt sure, had been removed by a servant at dawn, though the menials themselves denied having ever entered Omar's apartment before the hour of our early repast.

I was quite sceptical, my friends, and on the verge of slumber when a faint noise fell upon mine ear. I half rose from the divan, fully alert again. The sound repeated itself and my heart throbbed wildly with the erriness of the situation. I peered into the shadows expectantly—Omar had been right and a thief was approaching. Then I saw a door slowly opening—a human form was just dis-

cernible in the darkness. I placed my hand above my beating heart and watched spellbound until the figure should emerge into the moonlight. Very slowly it came—towards the divan, and I was filled with a great terror.

At that moment the moonlight disclosed every thing, for I could see the face of the intruder.

My friends, it was Omar Khayyam himself!—Omar sleepwalking, an expression of deep ecstasy upon his countenance. I saw motionless while he approached the bowl of roses.

Fascinated, I watched him unerringly draw forth the blooms. With great-rapture he caressed them, and a strange ritual commenced. The Master was scattering the petals ceremoniously from the edge of the moonlit balcony. Soon the bouquet was stript of all its blooms and the empty stems fell listlessly from his grasp to the ground.

Then, as slowly as he came, my Master, a gentle wraith, returned into the shadows.

“He who loved roses”—that, my friends, should be Omar’s epitaph.

* * *

*



XVIII. SANCTUARY

THE moon was rising above the blue hills beyond the lake. From her balcony in the *mahal* by the lakeside the Moslem girl watched the stars. Udaipur, the City of Lakes, was superb this cold season night. Her blood ran to the subdued rhythm of its beauty. Its white marble Palaces, the homes of the most noble Rajputs, shone with an immaculate pallor in the starlight. Below, from the battlements the songs of the

Usbek sentinels drifted across the stillness of the night, numbing her senses with their sadness.

Her name was Anarkali, and she lived in an apartment closed against the outer world by fifty feet of masonry rising sheer from the lake. She had lately come from the north-west, where her nomadic Persian mother had died of cholera in the mountains. After her mother's death she had found employment as a singer at Udaipur. She had a soft voice, and she soon pleased the Ruler Pertap with the songs of her land. In the mornings her toilet was elaborately arranged by her female attendants. Her hair was combed till its raven blackness crackled with a surfeit of vitality. Rising after its completion, she would survey herself in an adjacent pool. She realised at such moments that she was no longer a Persian nomad; she knew she was beautiful, and a peacock's pride assailed her as she gazed at her reflection below.

In the late afternoons, she would visit the zenana gardens. There, honey-seeking insects laboured busily over the pollen, and fountains made murmurous music where the tame Kingfishers preened themselves amid cascades of spray.

*

*

*

THE palace of the Mewar Ruler was a haven undreamed of in her narrow philosophy. The old rajah Pertap derived from her singing a genuine aesthetic satisfaction. Music, next to his strictly orthodox religious fervour, was his chief joy in life. The nuances of Kashmiri ditties fascinated and enlivened his veteran brain. At the conclusion of

his evening devotions it was his custom to send for Anarkali to entertain the Court. The cadences of her songs, laden with memories of his lost youth, delighted this old Rajput noble. Under the soft light of many-coloured candles he watched enraptured each gesture of the posturing Moslem girl. Her digital art was capable of portraying the mutual love of flowers. Sometimes, one of the onlooking courtiers, carried away by his emotion, would tear a glittering ring from his finger and throw it at Anarkali's feet, in fervid appraisal.

There amidst the music of sitars and sarangis the pleasures of song and dance were carried far into the night. And Pertap was not alone in his delight. His son Amar never missed one of these recitals by the Moslem girl. For many days, he had thought of little else save her image.

He let his eyes feast on her in the evenings, on the graceful contours of her body from waist to ankle, on the golden rythmically-sounding rings at her feet. Her raven black hair, peeping from its sari of gold muslin, entranced his vision. And when, the music over, she departed from the royal apartments, a great longing filled his soul, and furtively he wandered restlessly beyond the palace gardens in the early hours of the morning, a wide peasant's turban disguising his brow. Then his eyes would rest on the high turreted walls by the lakeside where Anarkali's living rooms were. He knew that they were guarded by two lynx-eyed Circassians and that such inviolability was supreme.

*

*

*

GAZING at the moon rising above the blue hills, Anarkali reflected that she had already been three months in the City of Lakes. Unknown to her, the nomadic instincts of her Timurid ancestors were coursing through her blood ; she was tiring of her gilt cage.

With materialistic insight she took stock of her position. She knew that her creed was a bar to any higher status in Pertap's household. Thus, in spite of the luxury of her days and the calm sanctuary of the palace walls, Anarkali realised that as a Persian Moslem she would have greater scope in Akbar's court at Agra. Many times in her childhood at Shiraz she had heard of the habits of all-powerful Akbar ; how, disguised as a peasant, he would frequent the nine-days Nauroz Fair in search of new songstresses for his celebrated harem. Drawing, too, of the Emperor and his caparisoned retinue she had seen, depicted nomad artists on the village walls in Sind. Delighted, she imagined her body circled with chains of Akbar wine-red rubies, or strung with his emeralds, greener than the eyes of all the felines in India. Might she not—she told herself become one of Akbar's wives, since her charm and her musical gifts had so easily pleased the righteous Hindu, Pertap ?

It was growing cold on the balcony. The Usbek sentinels no longer sang their plaintive lyrics. Night held the City of Lakes in its thrall. Anarkali's servant, a Kashmiri Amazon, brought a lighted *cigri* to her feet and she warmed her hands in its amicable glow.

Then she became aware of the servant's uneasiness.

"What is it?" she asked, petulantly.

"Bapu is coming!" the servant exclaimed hastily, her face reflecting the brightness of the *cigri's* flame. Anarkali stood rigid, her eyes dilated with sudden excitement.

Bapu was coming! She must change her dress, put on her most beautiful sari, bedeck herself with the Ruler's gift of pearls. Bapu was coming! She had never been so excited. It was an unforeseen event.

Before she could reach the doorway of her robing room a torch flared in the corridor and Pertap himself had crossed the threshold of her apartment. In dismay Anarkali salaamed with as much grace as her agitation allowed. She heard a phrase stumbling from her lips:—

"I am not worthy of thee, Huzoor," she said, as she nervously fingered the sari on her brow. The Ruler, who was clad in his white devotional garments, smiled disarmingly and seated himself on a divan. Anarkali was surprised to see no passion in his eyes.

"I have come peacefully, my child"—his tone was benign as he ordered her to seat herself at his feet—"on a matter of some urgency."

"Huzoor——"

"My child, thou knowest my son Amar?"

"Yea, Huzoor. I am humbly grateful for his charity." Collecting her thoughts Anarkali realised how seldom she had noticed Amar since that day

three months before when he had found her exhausted outside the palace gates. It was true that she had seen him at her evening recitals, but he had made no appeal to her senses.

“My son Amar hath cast his glance upon thee.”

Anarkali's eyes widened in surprise.

“He sleepeth not, but spendeth his days in reverie of thee. The cheetahs lie idle in his stables since thine advent. Thy music hath given me much pleasure, my child. I place no blame upon thee. Thy religion is not ours. My son cannot marry thee lawfully.”

With a blue-veined hand he patted the girl's head.

“I have made provision for thee. Salim, son of Akbar, is at my court. He shall come for thee at moonset and thou shalt depart with him for Agra. The camels will await thee beyond the palace walls. Three sentinels will accompany thee to my frontier.

Softly Anarkali was weeping. She could not herself have told whether her tears were genuine—as of truth they were—since she had suddenly felt security slipping from her grasp and grim poverty all conquering again. But at the mention of Salim, son of Akbar, her heart had quickened. It seemed that Kismet might be favourable after all.

“Be not distressed, my child. Salim will care for thee,” and again the old Rajput caressed her hair with his hand, saying:—“I give thee this stone as a token of the enjoyment thy singing hath given to my ageing ears. My child, I wish thee well.”

A moment later he had gone, and Anarkali found herself gazing at a diamond which sparkled with a great brilliance.

Outside the guards were noisily changing their positions on the battlements.

*

*

*

AT moonset the Circassian attendants came for her and in a jewelled *dhooli* she was carried secretly from the palace of the Ruler of Mewar. In the shadow of a spreading peepul tree the Prince Salim received her. A short distance away the camels were impatiently sniffing the chilly air.

Salim's face, illuminated by a torch flare, immediately attracted Anarkali. She had swiftly learnt something of his history from her Kashmiri servant. She had heard how the mighty Akbar had sent him with a message ordering Pertap to surrender the kingdom of Mewar and to attend as a vassal at his new capital, Fatehpur Sikhri. She had heard that Salim frequently flouted his father, that all the luxuries of the Orient were common-places in his experience. And here he was at her side, tall, well-built, the handsomest of Akbar's progeny.

With a courtly gesture he assisted her on to her mount. His brown, half-cruel eyes were pleasant in her sight; his low carefree laughter held her spellbound. Through the dark, deserted streets they rode, until the blue lake and the marble palaces of the city vanished wraith-like in the mist. Soon they had come to the realms of prickly pear and cactus, where the wild peacocks screeched

with indignant shrillness at the cavalcade of Camels.

Salim was talkative. Jestfully he commented on her beauty. Vivaciously he recounted to her examples of the amorous exploits of Akbar, and of his own brother, the Prince Danyal. Agra and Fatehpur Sikri were—he said—highly civilised cities. There, flourished the finest astrologers and *hakims* in the land. Padres of Portugal dwelt there, and llamas from Tibet. The Agra nautch-girls were the comeliest in Ind.

The hours passed and Salim's flow of anecdote remained unflagging in its vitality. Dawn had come over the level fields of millet. Coveys of partridges were greeting the morning. Anarkali was glad when Salim ordered the camel driver to halt in a shady grove. Flagons of cool sherbat were produced, and appetising food was spread out before them. The Moslem girl saw a mongoose cross her path. The animal had come from the left and she was troubled, for it was an inauspicious token of the future. In a moment she banished her fears with laughter. Already Salim, son of Akbar, was courting her with his glance——

* * *

THEY arrived at Agra within five days. The Imperial city was festive for it was Khusroj, the final day of the far-famed Nauroj Fair. Before reaching Salim's palace Anarkali experienced the thrill of beholding the Emperor riding in procession at sunset. From his *howdah* on a male elephant, gay with a breast plate of rubies, Akbar displayed

a godly dignity. She was close enough to note his black eyes and full eyebrows, his wheaten complexion and the diamonds sparkling on his chest. Behind him stalked a string of leopards. Anarkali's eyes were dazzled by the superbly attired cavalry, rich in gold morions and coats of mail, and by the scarlet-clad Pathan falconers whose noses bore a strangely accipitrine resemblance to their charges. In stateliness Akbar passed, and she gaped in wonder at his splendour.

The city's minarets flashed their grandeur in the waning sunlight. Later, from the palace tower, alone with Salim, she watched the crowds partaking in the Fair. From the great citadels the swirling masses came, clad in gowns which reminded her of pools of Persian lilac. The drums boomed their insane rhythms through the night.

Through the tapestry of leaves Anarkali, enervated by the music, viewed the scene with amazement. The air was thick with the odours of spice and garlic, musk and sandalwood, camphor and sweating bodies. Involuntarily Anarkali clutched Salim's arm. She was vaguely depressed by the limitless sadness of the music and by the religious exaltation of the fakirs.

*

*

*

THE following morning Salim's servants brought her pomegranates and buttermilk. These men were obeisant to her beauty; they were aware that the Prince was as wax in her hands. Rumours of her physical attributes spread swiftly to the harem of the imperial palace. There Akbar's wives,

concealing their mutual distrust, gossiped eagerly about the Prince Salim's return with a Persian nomad. Salim himself appeared before Anarkali at noon, his eyes still aglow with his passion. In his infatuation he allowed his official duties to lapse. He had not yet reported to his father the result of his mission to the Ruler of Mewar, nor had he troubled to deliver Pertap's politely defiant script, conveying to Akbar his scorn of the Emperor's threats.

The vision of Anarkali in the morning sunlight preoccupied him to the exclusion of all other interests. She graced his palace as no other occupant had ever done. She would make a fit wife—Salim began to brood over his father's attitude to such a marriage. Akbar was rigidly strict in domestic matters other than those concerning his own harem. He had banished his son, Prince Danyal, to a remote governorship in Bengal because of his degeneracy at the Agra Court. But Danyal was a weak and drug-shaken character. Salim had the strength sometimes to oppose his father's will.

With Anarkali he dallied in his palace gardens amongst the fantails and the white peacocks which plumed themselves in the mild winter warmth. Her laughter at a squirrel's antics fell melodiously on his ears.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the entrance to the garden. The white peacocks ceased their placid toilet and strutted with enquiring gait across the lawn. There were shouts of *Khoda Hafiz!*

beyond the parapet. Salim arose hurriedly, aware that Akbar was coming. With guilty eyes he saw his father enter the garden. The Emperor was accompanied by a body-guard of stalwart Moslems, flaunting netted beards and carrying scimitars of gold. Anarkali felt herself an intruder, but, hypnotised by the presence of Akbar, she was unable to move. She watched Salim salaam deeply before his father. Then she saw that Akbar was staring at her above Salim's bowed head, his wheaten features keen with curiosity. She heard his loud laughter as she covered her face with her sari.

"So my son, thou hast brought this cheap merchandise from Mewar."

Salim stood silent, his defiance giving way to fear. His father's majesty was overwhelming; the cooing of the fantails seemed stilled in the Emperor's presence. Akbar continued in an even tone——

"Is it not meet that, having returned, an ambassador should call dutifully on his Sovereign, a son upon his father? Perchance the Persian slut hath charmed the good manners out of thee, absorbing all thy filial duties in her passion."

Akbar, turned towards Anarkali, was laughing scornfully again. Then his voice subsided abruptly and his dark eyes fixed Salim with an omnipotent stare.

"My son, thou shalt accompany me to the Masjid at eventide and ask forgiveness of Allah."

Her face still covered, Anarkali heard the

arrogant tread of the bodyguard as the Emperor took his departure. She ran towards Salim, who was mute,—hatred, fear and reverence for his father still warring in his brain.

*

*

*

It was moonlight when Salim returned from the mosque after worshipping with Akbar. He had been away from Anarkali for four hours. During the long spell of prayer, and afterwards at the reception by the white-trouser'd imperial *ghazis*, his mind had frequently strayed from religious matters. Glancing upon his father's countenance as they sonorously chanted their psalms, he recollected the look in Akbar's eyes when he had laughed scornfully at Anarkali.

Side by side, father and son had prayed, their thoughts furtively straying to things temporal. Salim wondered if jealousy was the cause of his father's unharnessed laughter. He doubted if the failure of his mission to Mewar was responsible for Akbar's acid wrath.

And Akbar was thinking: "My sons are not worthy of me. This Salim is unfilial and defiant——" and he remembered Anarkali's lissomeness.

In pleasant anticipation Salim ascended the stairs of his palace. Anarkali would be awaiting him. He pictured her in her blue silken trousers and pearl embroidered bodice. She would soothe away the day's troubles, solace his uneasiness, so that his brow would become calm and unwrinkled. If his father continued to frown upon the marriage,

he would abscond with Anarkali to the friendly courtyards of Shiraz and Ispahan.

He flung open the door of his apartments and shouted "Anarkali, My beloved!"—— His voice echoed in the stillness; he could not understand why she had not answered his greeting. He rushed from room to room with increasing anxiety. Then he thought of the balcony overlooking the palace garden. She would surely be there, awaiting him in the moonlight as befitted a lover. He ran through the silent rooms, impetuously thrusting aside the heavy velvet curtains——

The balcony was empty.

Salim clutched the balustrade, overcome with a great fear. He found himself looking down upon the lawn where he had sat with Anarkali that morning before Akbar's arrival. An owl, buoyant on the scented air, flew across his line of vision.

Then he saw it, a monument of bricks at the corner of the lawn, a tall, slender monument which had not been there four hours before when he had left for the Masjid. A chill froze his body as he realised that Anarkali could now never return. Living, she had been immured by Akbar's masons.

Wildly he ran in from the moonlight which revealed her last sanctuary.



XIX. UNTO THE HILLS

HIS name was Gophira. He was an importuning *badmash* earning a living as a second-class guide. In common with most of his Kashmiri brethren, he was clad in an ungainly garment of sack-like cloth. In physique he was tall and broad. His sun-tanned Semitic features were coarsened to an unshaven scaliness by the raw winds from the Ladakh snows. For five months of the year it was his custom to hibernate with his parents in a squalid hovel off the main waterway at Srinagar. Like frightened vermin, the three of them would sit there inarticulately, clasping their *kangris*, or miniature stoves, closely to their stomachs under malodorous robes. Their most common-place thoughts were nullified by the intense cold. For the rest of the year it was part of Gophira's profession to occupy a prominent position among the many touts and scoundrels who, as flies around an open sore, besieged the Europeans on the Srinagar "bund."

Spring, when the Sahibs came north from the sun-scorched plains of the Punjab, and autumn, when the American tourist season was at its zenith, were his busy periods. At these seasons—armed with a series of postcards depicting Nanga Parbat's isolated majesty—he ensnared his prey. In a good period, when the Sahibs had been unusually

gullible, he made a handsome profit from escorting energetic visitors up the easier pinnacles accessible from the local valleys. He would shepherd topi-crowned American spinsters as far as the Zogi-La Pass, where the thrill engendered by the prospect of the Tibetan snows lessened the enormity of his charges and his liberal scale of *baksheesh* expected. A lamasery, precariously perched like a swallow's nest under a frowning scar of dark mountain, was a sight prone to banish miserliness from men's minds. . . . Gophira fully realized the power of nature over the tourists' purse-strings.

Yet, in spite of the profits of past seasons, he was in a quandary. He was bargaining for a wife. His hoped-for father-in-law was an astute individual who dealt in shawls and *objets d'art* ; he was known to be invincible in any business matter. Gophira was a little afraid of him. Nevertheless, he had approached him at the most favourable postprandial period when the merchant sat complacently smoking his *hookah*. He had asked him respectfully for his daughter's hand, only to be told that a thousand rupees cash was the price. Aroon, the daughter, was big-bodied and pleasant-faced in a Romany style ; her dark beauty attracted the tourist's glance. Gophira's thoughts were always of her. Secretly he had sent her bunches of white irises and lily of the valley and cheap Kashmiri sweetmeats. But a thousand rupees, he reflected, was an impossible sum for a second-class guide to expend upon the purchase of a wife, particularly when the profits of past seasons were

already spent. He did not doubt that the girl was worth the money, and he was careful to hide his poverty from the father, with whom his interview ended in amicable indecision.

Despondently he returned to the "bund," where his comrades, the shikara-men, laughed boisterously at his lovelorn misery.

The coming of spring accentuated his fever. In April the meadows were a sea of poppies, and breezes filled with the elusive fragrance of irises haunted the deodar-fringed mountain valleys. The various streams were merry with the melting snows. On the waters of the Dal Lake houseboats were again active, for the first visitors had arrived. Gophira, from his stand on the "bund," scanned each newcomer with an aquiline eye. He had learnt through long experience to pigeon-hole most European visitors. There were, in his philosophy, female missionaries with low-heeled shoes, stalwart figures, and ill-fitting "terai" hats, and Americans whose voices were like a skewer drawn roughly across a birdcage, and upright subalterns from 'Pindi and Peshawar and a score of other types to be summed up and approached cunningly with decorous shyness.

Up till that morning the season had been barren. Gophira with his postcards had accosted every potential newcomer—unsuccessfully. He was weary of rebuffs from memsahibs whose looks were more frigid than the snows. At last, however, the bait had been taken. It was an American this time, a young, sad-countenanced fellow, well

dressed and clearly well endowed.

"Sahib, Salaams," said Gophira, sycophantically producing his pictures.

"Huzoor would like a nice view of Nanga Parbat?" His prey glanced at the postcard with interest. There was none of the subaltern's intolerance or disdain in his attitude. Gophira sold him a packet of views and followed up the advantage with a beaming face. Did the Sahib require a guide for climbing? Good references, and all equipment supplied at less than market prices.

The young American eyes were alert with the sudden onslaught of a new idea. They were no longer brimful of melancholy. Gophira could see the spirit of adventure growing in them.

"Say, what's your name?" he was asked.

"Gophira, Huzoor; I am experienced Himalayan climber."

"And those references?"

Gophira drew forth a greasy pocket book. His fellow-touts, the shikara-men and the vendors of shawls and rugs, were watching him with amused smiles. Five soiled sheets of faked references were displayed. The prey read the first carefully.

I have found Gophira an excellent guide and natural rock-climber accustomed to snow work. As a cook and *Khitmatgar* he has been most satisfactory. His soups are especially good. He is thoroughly honest and reliable. I recommend him as a masseur."

(Signed) Lieut.-Col. Digby French-Mullens.

"Okay. Come round to the hotel in the morning," said the young American.

They set out a week later for the mountains. Through placid green valleys they went, where peasant women worked like little black insects scattered across the cup-shaped fields. Then followed a climb to regions where the world's loneliness was broken only by faint echoes of a cuckoo's call. Amidst resinous pines they camped, the cynosure of the hillside Kashmiris who gathered round the log-fire to stare bovinely at the wonders of the Sahib's tent. With those tall goitrous, Biblically-bearded rustics Gophira gossiped and played cards each evening after the day's trek. Inside the tent the young American, digesting an ill-cooked meal, read magazines or wrote letters by the light of the signal-lamp. In Gophira's estimation, the Sahib was a morose, childish type, a little tired of civilization and an adventurous and travel-smitten as most Americans.

Coming up to the hills he had seldom spoken; even the sight of congeries of bears playing at dusk upon the mountain side roused but little excitement in his sad-eyed countenance. Late each night in the moonlight Gophira sat by the fire's embers, his *kangri* pleasantly warming his stomach, and meditated upon his master and upon his own difficulties and ambitions. Before leaving on the expedition, he had offered the father of Aroon five hundred rupees for the girl...it was a stupidly daring offer, the result of his amorous frenzy, since all he possessed was the hundred rupees which the

young American had advanced to him for provisions.

Drawing with irritating complacence at his *hookah*, the merchant had declined the offer, and soon afterwards Gophira had left the city and trekked up those cuckoo-haunted valleys with a mind perplexed and governed by his absent heart. On those quiet moonlit nights, when the card-playing hillmen had returned to their homesteads, Gophira alone remained awake in the eerie silence of the camp. The snoring of the sleeping coolies, the buoyant passage of an owl, the bleating of a new-born lamb in the valley, the harsh cavalcade from an avalanche to the north—these were sounds which scarcely penetrated the dark confusion of his reverie. A dream-heavy sleep would follow, and the dawn found him a little grim and weary at the day's programme.

The young American was active in the mornings. The pink translucent radiance of the early sun on the snow above roused in him an excess of energy. He expected the rest of the camp to be equally active. *Jaldi*—a key-word from his small vocabulary—he flung savagely at the coolies as they lethargically struck camp to set off for higher altitudes.

After three days' ascent along the border of ravines cleft by foaming torrents they reached the base of their objective, a mountain of eighteen thousand feet, snow-capped and austere. The lower flanks were clothed in a crinoline of forest, and it was with difficulty that the party made

headway through the sodden masses of leaf-mould. The walls of dark greenery bordering the uncertain track were pierced fitfully by the sun's rays. The calls of a few birds alone impinged upon his etiolated stillness. At intervals a stream was passed over, and a score of purple and yellow butterflies could be glimpsed as they gambolled above the limpid water.

The steep, tortuous climb to the white plateau was a two days' journey. The last belt of pine was reached; snow leopards were seen. With the changing landscapes came a sense of intense exhilaration—the rough, sand-complexioned faces of the coolies were transformed by waves of taut excitement. Here was a cloud-cuckoo land beyond the range of a biped's thoughts. Amongst these vassal peaks dwelt djinns and those satyrs of the snow—the legendary creatures called Mi-Go. The superb panorama of dazzling cones which stretched away to the Karakoram emphasized the littleness of man. That human sacrifices to these white deities should have at one time been made by the hillmen seemed but natural rites.

The young American was awakened to new life. The freshness of a new world conveyed itself quickly to his limbs. Drawing long breaths of the soft air, he gazed with enchantment at the slow-moving groups of cumuli which were the sentries of this white silence. For long periods he watched the cloud-shadows creeping across the snow. The vultures circling with graceful movements above the adjacent peak were a magnet to his eyes.

He decided to set out for the summit on the following morning.

When a turbulent sunset swept the western horizon the party—a microcosm in a lost land—found a sheltered camping ground under a protecting ridge. The night became unsettled and wan. The wind rose and flurries of snow whistled across the canvas. Gophira, dreaming ruefully in a sanctuary with the coolies, watched the stars as they gradually became obscured by drifts of mist. The Sahib had commanded him to be ready at dawn with rope and axes to climb the nearest peak, which now appeared a dark blur far above.

Suddenly the guide laughed. The climb was not an easy one for a Kashmiri hillman—there were steep ice gullies, crevasses and traverses, which called for the skill of an experienced mountaineer.

And the Sahib was a novice in this new world. . . . Again Gophira's secret thoughts compelled him to laugh.

At dawn, when Gophira and his master commenced their trek to the main peak, the last frosty stars still lingered in the blue above the summit. Two hours' progress across thick, unyielding snow-fields brought them to the foot of the glacier which they skirted as the early mists dissolved. Soon the sun gleamed forth in its full glory. The more formidable shelves of rock beneath the white slopes of the peak were now visible. Glancing back, the climbers could no longer see the camp; the valley itself was incredibly remote. The going so far had been easy, the virgin snow being trustworthy be-

neath the feet. The young American in his eagerness preceded Gophira on these level terraces.

By nine o'clock they had roped themselves together securely under the first mild cliff. Once or twice in the ascent of this the young American had paused to look downwards towards the route by which they had come. For the first time he was conscious of a faint sense of vertigo. He knew he had no head for mountains, and took care to hide the sudden sensation from the guide.

By looking upwards at the easy bits in prospect he conquered his fears. Climbing carefully, they made slow progress and once more reached a gentle white slope. Here, however, the snow was less buoyant. On several occasions they sank in waist-line deep. Minor crevasses, cunningly concealed, were an increasing danger. It was easy for Gophira to see that the Sahib was becoming breathless. At the first close sight of the peak, crystal clear in the now fierce sunlight, both renewed their efforts. With a rhythmic trudge they crossed the slope and again found ridges immediately ahead.

After an hour's struggle on the rock face the young American realized that the character of the mountain had changed. A difficult chimney necessitated the careful use of axes and a sure judgment of balances on Gophira's part. The peak which looked so accessible from the last slope now appeared to be guarded by ice walls where overhangs were not uncommon. A second attack of vertigo overcame the Sahib as they made their way across a traverse towards a wide ridge. On

this occasion he could not subdue his terror. The almost vertical wall of ice above, and the steep chimney which they had just negotiated, were as Scylla and Charybdis to his frenzied mind. He grew hysterical; cautiously Gophira hauled him across the narrow ledge to the safety of a platform of snow. He was afraid lest the Sahib should slip and drag him down also.

They were now surrounded by corridors of ice. Like a pair of flies isolated in a bed of salt, they rested on the platform. Around them the noon-tide silence was shattered by the hollow roar of intermittent avalanches. The peak itself seemed to be listening...vibrant and antagonistic. The young American had never experienced such terror; desperately he bound a silk handkerchief across his eyes. He knew that he could not continue the ascent and was paralysed by the immensity of the enterprise. All the pleasure had gone out of the element of risk. Hysterically, he anticipated the return journey across that narrow traverse, down that terrifying chimney...

While the Sahib lay there inertly with bound eyes Gophira watched him intently. He heard him say in a frenzied voice that they would go no higher. The guide, who had doubts of his own capacity to achieve the next fifty feet, stretched his limbs across the shelf, relaxing fully. A smile of intense cunning spread over his features. His hand went to his rucksack. With a cautious glance at his blindfolded master he drew forth a Tibetan clasp-knife. The plan which had almost uncon-

sciously been maturing in his brain for several days was close to fruition. He began to gauge the extent of the Sahib's vertigo. By his inability to descend the long chimney, the young American would be playing into his hands. In silence the pair remained for twenty minutes on the table of rock. Then the Sahib wrenched the binding from his head and gave the order to commence the descent.

Gophira could see the stark terror in his eyes. Slowly he led the way back to the traverse.

The afternoon mists were collecting. A rising wind blew eddies of snow upwards towards the scythe-keen precipices. It was at that moment that the Sahib collapsed in the centre of the traverse. Completely overcome, he whimpered incoherently, his eyes buried in the obscurity of the ice-wall. The possibility of a slip into the chasm below had disseminated his last shreds of forced courage. Once more Gophira pulled him into safety...the moment of culminating terror arrived. The prospect of the chimney to be descended numbed the Sahib's intellect until he was a limp burden in the guide's hands.

Gophira's eyes dilated with excitement. Detaching the rope from his own body, he secured it twice around his master's, and persuaded him to let himself be lowered down the dreaded chimney. Desperately, over the jutting rock, the young American, placing his life in the guide's hands, allowed himself to be suspended in space between the two walls. Within a minute his body was out

of sight and as suddenly Gophira ceased dealing out of the rope. His plan was ripe for execution. Taking the clasp-knife from his pocket, he roughly severed the rope...

There was a muffled scream from below. The guide's eyes glittered in the deep silence that followed. Then he proceeded to thrust the knife deep into the ice-wall. Already he had half persuaded himself that there had been an accident... the sharp edge of rock had pierced the Sahib's rope...

He began the difficult descent of the chimney. It took him an hour to reach the inanimate body. The Sahib's broken neck satisfactorily fulfilled his anticipations. He set out to search the Sahib's pockets... Fifteen hundred rupees in notes he found, a bunch of keys, a letter...

With some difficulty he read the last.

Dear Hester (it ran),—Travel has afforded no solace. I am seeking help in the mountains, where a kindly avalanche may end everything. The divorce will be through next month.

Uncomprehending, Gophira tore the letter to pieces, which he concealed far down in a snow crevice. Then he hid twelve hundred rupees next to his skin, and, leaving the body as it had fallen cheerfully arose to descend and acquaint the cohort of coolies of the Sahib's fatal accident.

XX. THE HANDS OF PIETR CORNELIUS

THE coaster had made its way leisurely from Saigon, touching at a number of small ports on the Cambodian mainland, loading copra and edible birds' nests from some of the larger Siamese islands in the gulf. The trip had been pleasant, for it was December, with cool starlit nights and the days tempered by constant breezes. The Dutch captain was expert in his knowledge of the coast which, in his opinion, was as delightful as any area in the Celebes. We had called at romantic Koh-si-chang, the Island of the Four Elephants, and had picnicked in the derelict palace of King Chulalongkorn, shelled by the French as a prelude to their annexation of Cambodia. We had swum in the twilight at Kohsamt, where the lagoon is so girdled by flamboyantes as to resemble a cauldron of fire; we had partaken of sharks' fin soup with the Jesuit missionaries at Bokor. These were landfalls of enchantment. I learned to share the Captain's sentiments. The coast was nostalgically lovely and the islands a paradise fit for lotos eaters.

Then one evening, when the first stars were appearing, we dropped anchor at what appeared to be an atoll inhabited only by flashing swallows and the ubiquitous sea-mews. A group of '*Kay-longs*,' however, and a spiral of blue smoke beyond,

betokened the presence of humanity. I found the captain standing beside me.

"Care to go ashore?" he asked. "We call this the island of the sea-gipsies. I have a friend here—a *farang*." The captain puffed at his pipe and smiled tantalisingly. I showed my surprise. It seemed strange that a foreigner should dwell in this isolated spot. I suspected a beachcomber, though such are not common north of Macassar.

We rowed ashore with a basket of provisions and a box of iced drinks.

"I stop here every voyage," said the captain. "My friend, who may interest you, is always glad of a few copies of the *Bangkok Times*, some tobacco and a couple of bottles of schnapps. He's a character, a man of intelligence and sufficient means to be happy in his environment."

By the time we had stepped upon the beach a group of fisher-folk had collected near us, squat, sturdily-built Siamese with copper-coloured limbs, and cheerful, friendly countenances, handsome in their flat Mongoloid fashion. Two youths ran forward and took the captain's cargo. There were about a score of young men present and I realised that the island was bigger than I had imagined. A cluster of huts—artistic little dwellings with miniature prangs, quaint and tapering, on their roofs—was silhouetted in the fading dusk.

"My friend Pietr's abode is the local palace," the captain informed me laughingly as we wended our way under an avenue of casuarina trees already sparkling with the coruscations of fireflies. The

air was scented with frangipani and the evening was superlatively calm. The huts were a little village in themselves. I noticed a rotund, complacent Chinaman seated on a doorstep, under a petrol-lamp.

"He's the proprietor of the opium-shop," said the captain. "It's the local rendezvous."

We passed through a plantation of pomegranates and papayas and suddenly came upon a pleasantly-designed wooden building with an ornamental Chinese garden in front of it. Two lanterns illuminated the courtyard. The captain called out a greeting in Dutch and a moment later a white man appeared, a very tall, stout person whose long silky hair gleamed in the lamplight. A singlet and sarong clad his stalwart form. His jovial eyes glistened with pleasure. He and the captain embraced each other good-humouredly.

"Bruder, I'm glad to see you. My schnapps is finished some days," the tall man said as he eyed me with surprise.

"I've brought a visitor, Pietr," said the captain, introducing me formally and adding, "Pietr Cornelius is King of the Island Gipsies."

"I am most pleased to meet you, mynheer," said Pietr Cornelius without shaking hands. "But I am not King of the gipsies. That is my goot friend's leetle joke."

He bellowed with laughter. A Chinese servant, a saturnine individual with a scarred face, brought forward rattan chairs and we sat down on the dais-like entrance to the dwelling. From where I

was sitting, I could see the moon rising above the casuarinas, a vista of silver wavelets being discernible between the stems of the trees.

"Well, how's the world?" shouted Pietr Cornelius with enormous gusto.

"As horrible as ever," answered the captain. "They're doing *Aida* at the Opera in Saigon. The new soprano is cutting her second teeth. Her bosom, they say, has concealed scaffolding."

Pietr Cornelius roared with laughter. His robust, musical tones echoed through the night. It was not until then that I noticed with a sudden shock that the man had no hands.

The Chinese 'boy' placed before us a table with the captain's iced drinks and a liberal assortment of the *smorrebrod* which was one of the coaster's delicacies. Peitr Cornelius was duly fed by the servant. I observed that he had an appetite in proportion to his bulk.

"You like my island, eh?" he inquired of me abruptly, while the 'boy' held a mouthful ready.

"It is beautiful," I answered.

"My friend Pietr has been here for fifteen years. He is almost the *tesa* or governor of the island! The fisher-folk, though they pay Siamese poll-tax, like to be regarded as his subjects," explained the captain.

"Ach, they are the best folks in the world," joined in Pietr Cornelius. "They are children but so nicely-behaved. I lof them and they lof me. We are happy. What more you want?"

I could hear strains of Siamese music emanating from stringed instruments somewhere nearby. The brozen-limed fisher-youths were evidently serenading their maidens in the moonlight.

"I have not always been so happy. Noh ! You see these, eh ?"

And Pietr Cornelius held out his handless wrists to me. There was nothing pathetic in the gesture, nor anything of bravado. The servant raised his schnapps. Cornelius sipped it slowly with enjoyment.

"You might be interested in my story. Mynheer, the captain, will soon go and watch the *puyings* dancing on the beach. He is interested in the Siamese *lakon* dances and maybe in the *puyings* !"

I could see a mischievous glint in the speaker's eyes. Shortly afterwards the captain apologetically went for a stroll, to work off—he said—the effect of the schnapps.

"Well, my goot friend," resumed Pietr Cornelius, "I will tell you my story. I lof talking so you will excuse me. I once lived in London and Paris, and to talk Engleesh or French is like medicine to me. *Aow mai keet fai*, Lim Kee."

At these words the servant Lim Kee lit and settled his master's pipe in position. A series of comfortable puffs followed. The Chinese then squatted at his master's feet with the pipe ready.

"To begin with, I was a convict at Pulo Condore," said Pietr Cornelius equably.

Pulo Condore ! I had often heard of it as the Devil's Island of the East, a grim, remote rock off

the Mekong's mouth, where the summer heat was comparable to Red Sea standards.

"The French authorities sent me to Pulo Condore for killing an official—*le debauché*!—who deserved worse than he got at my hands—that's my leetle joke!" and Pietr Cornelius, laughing boisterously, held up his handless wrists again.

"They sent me to Pulo Condore—which is the world's hell—with one other white man and a gang of old criminals from Annam and Hainan, fellows with low foreheads and eyes like the animals. They sent us in chains in the month April, the most hot of all the year. When we landed at the island the ground burnt our feet like fire—my white companion died after two weeks of it. They put me in a solitary cell where the rock scorpions ran across my body in the dark night. In the hot day I crushed rock with the Annamites and the Chinese. I crushed rock for six months until the palms of my hands were like the raw meat. Ach, it was terrible! I could work no more. At night I cried out in my cell until the Zouave gaoler gagged my mouth roughly. Then the rats came each night and began to eat the raw flesh off my hands. The warders drank their vermouthees and read *L'Illustration* and flogged the Annamites and my hands were tasty food for the rats. *La vermine!* They were gourmets, they nibbled my raw fingers as I slept. They enjoyed white flesh, those troubadours! Their bloodshot eyes rolled in the moonlight and their bodies were as big as the cats. I was helpless.

Then, mynheer, I met a friend—the Chinaman who brought me the pigs' food convicts' diet, that *bouillabaisse* from the sewers of Saigon. He was kind. He smuggled me in more than my ration of water for my hands. He was the only man with a heart on Pulo Condore. I was going mad slowly. Sometimes I saw the Annamites dying and thought of ways to kill myself. Often, mynheer, I dreamt I was dead, and then I would awake to hear the rats and the rock-scorpions moving hurriedly away in the darkness. The Chinaman was kind. He still is—observe him lighting my pipe. *Aow mai keet fai*, Lim Kee."

Pietr Cornelius ceased speaking and I watched the saturnine Lim Kee place the pipe in position again while his master inhaled deeply.

"Lim Kee has been with me since the night we made our escape. He is a most good and faithful servant."

I looked at Lim Kee's scarred, sinister countenance and sensed that as an enemy he would be anything but a pleasant proposition.

"He was once a convict, and then at Pulo Condore he was promoted to cook the prisoners' offal. He is a goot surgeon, too! *Mor chalart marg*, eh Lim Kee." The Chinese smiled at his master in the manner of an adoring dog: his face completely lost its aura of malevolence.

"Lim Kee cut off my hands after we reached this island," continued Pietr Cornelius. "They were septic and on the point of gangrene. He did the operation with much *aplomb*."

“But how did you escape from Pulo Condore ?” I asked.

“That again was Lim Kee’s doing. It was his duty at Pulo Condore to throw the garbage from the prison into the sea. I had often, while breaking the stones, seen him rolling two large casks to an opening in the rock into which he would empty the rubbish. The contents of the casks fell into a tidal grotto to be washed out to sea in the course of a few hours. Now Lim Kee had once been a servant in Bangkok and spoke understandable Siamese. So, one night as he brought me my extra water ration, I put forward a whispered plan to him, for I was desperate by then. Even in the daytime the image of those rats had begun to haunt my brain. In the intense heat the cell was air-less and filled with the rank odour of their bodies. It was either suicide for me or the most drastic method of escape. I confided fully in Lim Kee in our brief moments together and he agreed, not only to arrange to pack me under the offal in the cask, but to accompany me out to sea, for he, too, hated those French tyrants. Ach, we needed to be so careful of the devilish Zouave sentries. Fortunately they were sluggish *canaille*, spending the hot hours sleeping and drinking and playing at cards. They did not suspect that we were capable of escape from that hell. They became alive only when the Inspector came once a month from Saigon with their vermouth and their piastres or when they whipped the Teochiewes who fainted at the breaking of the stones.

But, mynheer, we were too clever for that Algerian trash ! I waited for an afternoon when the sea was calm before the new moon. When Lim Kee packed me in the cask under the offal the Zouave gaoler was taking his siesta heavily in the shaded side of the cell. As Lim Kee rolled the two casks to the cove we passed under the snouts of the other sentries ! They did not at all—what you say ?—smell a rat !—that is my leetle joke ! In spite of the bumps I hugged myself in the cask. The stench of the offal was most terrible but I was laughing at my so clever ruse. At the opening in the rock Lim Kee quickly tilted the cask and I dropped plonk ! covered with offal into the water. It was cool and refreshing in the grotto. Lim Kee pushed the two casks through the hole and jumped down himself. We stayed there quiet as mice, the empty casks floating beside us. Soon we heard the whistle blown by the Zouaves, which meant that the convicts were due to return to their cells from the breaking of the stones. It was nearly sunset. We could see the red glimmer of the placid water. I hugged myself again. Then we filled the bottom of the casks with stones and sand as ballast, and as soon as it was dark we steered the casks into the current and got into them. *Mon Dieu !* I was excited then ! They floated upright and we paddled ourselves away from the island. Lim Kee had taken a piece of rope and tied it to my cask, so that we kept together. All night we drifted away from the island in the darkness. We drifted westward as I expected, for I

had often watched the flotsam from the offal floating towards the sunset. Lim Kee had secreted two tins of food and water rations in his belt. My plan worked—what you say?—without the hitch. At sunrise the island was out of sight and we could see no signs of pursuers. But soon we saw the fins of sharks. We shouted loudly when they came near the casks and the noise kept them away. It was very lonely. Only the sea-birds circled above us in the bright sunshine. We wrapt our damp trousers around our heads to keep off the heat. The ocean remained so quiet and for three days we drifted peacefully, rationing our food and water. At night I tried to find pictures in the stars and sometimes I slept a little from exhaustion, but the pain in my hands was too terrible, till at last I began to consider that it might be better to give myself to the *requins* whose fins always followed us. I was also afraid of a storm coming and upsetting the casks, but God helped us with a smooth sea. Lim Kee was optimistic. He thought it a goot joke and he told me many times not to give up hope, though our provisions and water were running low. On the fourth day the pain in my hands was unbearable and I cried out to God hysterically to save me. In the afternoon I sank into what I thought was my last coma. I must have been asleep for some hours when I awoke to hear Lim Kee shouting excitedly. Darkness had come. Then I saw that there were lights reflected in the water fifty yards away. I knew that God was goot and that we were saved. We had

cheated Death. The boats that rescued us belonged to the Siamese sea-gipsies, light fishing craft which were only a little steadier than the catamarans of Ceylon or than our own casks ! The fishermen were cheerful and friendly as soon as they heard us talking Siamese and understood that we were not *phi*, or spirits of the ocean. They gave us food and coconut milk. After another day and a night they brought us to this island where I have been ever since with my rescuers. I lof them and they lof me. They are goot, happy folks and I am a happy man. I only think of Pulo Condore and its rats when I regard my wrists !” Pietr Cornelius exploded into laughter again and then called to Lim Kee for a sip of schnapps. Smacking his lips appreciatively, he continued :

“By the time we reached the island my hands—lumps of decaying flesh—were finished. I knew I should die unless they were cut off. I was comatose and half-paralysed. Again Lim Kee came to my rescue. He knew that amputation was essential. He consulted the wisest of the fathers in the village. They sat in council and, before I knew what was happening, I found myself in the centre of a lantern-lit excited throng. A sort of *fiesta*, mynheer. They made a great bonfire in the centre of the village. In spite of my semi-conscious condition I was aware that the island liquor—a variation of toddy—was being consumed liberally on all sides by merry youths who danced frenziedly to the strains of an old Siamese *heep-plaing*. The

dances of the sea-gipsies, mynheer, are beautiful and primitive. I sat dazedly watching the movements of brozen limbs in the firelight. Suddenly I saw Lim Kee beside me with a bowl of island liquor. I drank it and felt strangely happy. I forgot my festering hands. I drank two more bowls of the liquor and began to forget everything. The soporific music swelled in intensity. The world contained only light and gaiety and I was numb with happiness. In other words, mynheer, I was quite drunk !

It was Lim Kee who told me afterwards what had happened. The whole *fiesta* had been on my behalf. The wisest of the *ta-gair*—the most elderly and respected of the sea-gipsies—had decided that my hands should be cut off when I was thoroughly intoxicated. And Lim Kee, as soon as I was unconscious, had carried out the operation with a Malayan *Kris*. The fisher-maidens had bandaged my wrists with strips of cloth from their sarongs. I felt very little pain afterwards. In ten days I was convalescent. My body daily regained the vigour which had been drained from it at Pulo Condore. In the company of these gentle folk I gradually began to dream less of the greed of those settlement rats. It was not long before I became an islander—going to the *Kaylongs* each morning for the catch, setting the nets at night, swimming in the lovely dusks at the lagoon, playing Siamese *ta-kraw*, and chess in the Chinese opium-shop. No, I have never become an addict. Very few of the Siamese fisher-folk take the drug ;

it is the odd score of Chinese traders who form the clientele. Opium brings happiness of a negative sort. My life, mynheer, is complete without such a stimulant."

Pietr Cornelius once more sipped the schnapps held out to him by Lim Kee. Soon we heard footsteps and the captain appeared from the shadows.

"Well, skipper, I've been boring your friend," exclaimed Pietr Cornelius, waving his wrists, "But talking Engleesh again is like medicine to me. I lof it and I take advantage of your friend."

He turned and addressed me apologetically. "You must excuse my long tongue, mynheer," he said suavely.



XXI. DARK HAZARD

THE island of Pulo Kundo was technically an outpost of the British Empire. The presence of a tin mine and a coconut plantation was responsible for its inclusion on the map amongst the red-dotted portion of the Malay Archipelago. The British Resident and the Australian manager of the tin mine constituted the white population of the island, which, to all intents and purposes, was as lonely an outpost as any in the remoter spheres of the Pacific. Its solitude was of a tantalising nature, for it faced a horizon which was frequently silhouetted with Singapore-bound liners. Twice a month a tramp put in for a cargo of copra and tin; it also delivered the mail.

Robert Montgomery Jordeyne had been British Resident at Pulo Kundo for twenty years. He was one of those forgotten officials one occasionally comes across in the colonial service. His public school and university education deserved a fuller flowering than that afforded by this isolated backwater which destiny had decreed as the locale of his life's work. Naturally a misogynist, his twenty years in the *ulu* had imbued in him a vague subconscious dislike of civilization. He had never 'gone native.' The sepia-skinned population knew him as a *tuan* kindly and aloof and somewhat ascetic of countenance. To his two Chinese Clerks

he remained a mystery. Since his mother's death—some years before—he had been alone in the world. His mother had written punctiliously each week, recording explicitly the vagaries of the London climate. But to Jordeyne the twice monthly visit of the tramp steamer had meant nothing more than the arrival of two of his mother's letters, boldly and proudly addressed to 'Robert Montgomery Jordeyne, His Majesty's Resident.' Complete loneliness since her death had been his lot, and he bowed to its rulings with a settled contentment. His triennial periods of furlough in future, he knew, would be mere intervals of boredom in a temperate climate. He had grown to like his exile. He found enjoyment in sitting each evening on the verandah and watching the unruly western horizon in its sunset's throes. The reflected crimson creeping over the quiet, blue patches of water, the chalk-white arc of a gull's wing in the darkening sky, the clusters of sampans growing busy with their nightlines—these sights he had learnt to love; they were part of his day as much as the official report to Singapore was part of his fortnightly routine. There was a peculiarly beautiful melancholy in the combined circumstances of the Malayan twilight which atoned for the prosaic heat of the day. Sometimes, at dusk, he strolled down to the neighbouring *Kampong* where, as tax-collector and 'tuan-in-charge,' he was respectfully saluted by the Sarong-clad inmates of each bamboo hut. The Chinese traders greeted him with obsequious smiles. Above their looms

Malay housewives bowed pleasantly. There were strangely lovely echoes from stringed instruments amongst the casuarinas by the sea's edge. The purring of the nightjars and the humorous incantations of the tokke-lizards—these had become part of his unvarying existence——

All this, he now reflected ruefully, was to be changed. That morning over breakfast he had watched the tramp come to anchor in the vista of blue roadstead visible from the verandah. Half an hour later the mail was duly delivered. A second, unexpected O. H. M. S. letter had arrived. It contained the news of his transfer to Java in a month's time. He was to be relieved by a man called Bernardine from the Malayan Civil Service. As he read the letter for the third time, Jordeyne realised fully its terrifying import. He had been ordered to leave Pulo Kundo, to give up his long afternoon siesta and his evening meditations over a sunset sea. He would no longer be his own master. In Batavia or Sourabaya, in a steamy environment of commerce and bustle, he would undoubtedly be a fish out of water, a middleman in some unpleasantly orthodox legation post.

Then a strange thought assailed him. Was he fit for civilization? Had not his twenty years sojourn at Pulo Kundo destroyed all his social sense? His sole white companion on the island, the Australian tin miner, he met as seldom as possible. Was he not now essentially a hermit?—his very thoughts nourished on introspection and heightened by the island's captivating solitude.

He lit a cheroot and extended himself in a rattan chair. His concern at the official order successfully hindred his morning's work. The advent of a Chinese 'boy,' announcing tiffin, still found him gazing idly across the tawny shadows of the compound. In the roadstead the tramp had weighed anchor and was clean set for the west, where a brown-sailed junk swooned under its heavy canvas.

Chaotic of mind, Jordeyne rose and went in to his midday meal.

*

*

*

FOURTEEN days later he stood at the quayside in his official uniform. A telegram in code had come with the news that Bernardine was arriving by the tramp—the thought beat itself into Jordeyne's brain. Already he could dimly see his successor approaching in the launch which nosed its way skilfully through the medley of sampans, a nimble dragon-fly cleaving the blue heat above the water's surface. A couple of minutes later the craft had come to rest and Bernardine was ascending the gangway.

Jordeyne considered his successor's appearance. He saw him as a stocky individual with a prominent double chin. He went forward to shake hands and found himself noting the other's features clearly. The fellow looked as if he was fond of the bottle. He was dressed untidily. Not quite a gentleman, Jordeyne subconsciously decided. The newcomer's voice was husky and cheerful.

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume," he said, and laughed loudly at the joke. Behind them the

Chinese office staff bowed with sleek servility. On the short walk to the bungalow Jordeyne answered the newcomer's platitudes with subconscious exactness. He found himself agreeing that the monsoon was overdue and that the weather had been uncommonly sticky of late. Then he heard the other say——

"I reckon you're delighted to get away. How have you managed to keep sane in this spot?"

"Oh, there's the office routine," mumbled Jordeyne. "As a matter of fact, I've grown to like the island. I've been here twenty years, you know."

Bernardine was laughing.

"You've got stamina," he chuckled. "A year of this will drive me crazy."

At tiffin Jordeyne let himself listen lethargically to his successor's loquaciousness. With increasing contact, he realised that his predisposed dislike of Bernardine was changing into an unnatural hatred. This man, he guessed, would be a despot, a monument of whiskey-nurtured arrogance ruling the village in the manner of a Central European dictator. Pulo Kundo was lost on this type of official, wasted on the 'desert air' of bovinity which was Bernardine's chief characteristic.

"These Malay girls are pretty hot stuff," the the husky voice was saying.

A gust of laughter followed the speech.

Jordeyne forced himself to smile at the sentiments.

"You're a bachelor?" the other was asking.

"Yes," answered Jordeyne, rising and putting an end to the conversion.

"You'll find everything in your room ready for your siesta."

A little awkwardly he left the verandah.

*

*

*

AFTER dinner that first evening they sat smoking cheroots in the bungalow porch. The last traces of daylight had faded from a horizon where saffron and crimson had blended mellifluently before the night's coming. Soon Jordeyne found his attention distracted by the rising moon. A little wind, flute-like and fey, had commenced to play hide and seek in the neighbouring foliage.

"Singapore's always been a tonic to me," his companion was saying. "I need a dose of civilization at times."

Jordeyne smiled. He thought of his dining-room with its ant-ravaged floor, of the smoky Kerosene lamps, of the meal of tinned produce just concluded, of the sensuous throbbing night outside, of primitive Pulo Kundo which he had learnt to love with a strange intensity——

Bernardine's penetrating voice then disturbed his fancies.

"I feel like a swim—must get my weight down."

Jordeyne started at the words. An impulse arose like a sudden gust of wind in his brain. A swim—Bernardine had made the unlooked-for suggestion. Of course. An excellent idea. There was the lagoon to the east of the roadstead. It would be very pleasant in the moonlight. A vision

of the scene presented itself to him. The fishing folk would be driving the *ekan krian* into the V-shaped traps. Like silver rain, he pictured the captured shoals leaping desperately into the netting, their jaws human in their muted agony.

Then the scene changed itself. Involuntarily he thought of an isolated reef to westward, within canoeing distance—a sequestered piece of water facing the open straits and unfrequented even by the *kaylong* fishers. Often, at full moon, he had paddled to the spot and absorbed its austere beauty.

But he had never dared to bathe there—The primitive sea-gipsies alone visited those forsaken, shark-haunted waters.

On a sudden whim Jordeyne decided that he would bring Bernardine to the reef.

They set out in the moonlight for the foreshore. As they walked through the undergrowth in the direction of the sea, Jordeyne smoked ruminatively. He blamed the moonlight for a strange and sudden sense of exhilaration. He knew he could easily have satisfied Bernardine's wish for a swim by bringing the fellow to the lagoon nearby. But, perversely, he was now bringing him to the far-off reef.

In the intervals of Bernardine's chatter, he could hear the sound of the breeze rustling softly through the palm leaves. The booming of the surf on the shore re-echoed faintly in the distance. The night was alive with the exaltation of the crickets. The populace of the *Kampongs* had retired to sleep, and the absence of humanity caused

Bernardine to comment once more on the island's isolation. The shadows of the casuarinas were woven into a tracery of ghostly reflections on the ground beneath their feet. The screen of jungle behind seemed to Jordeyne—as it always did—dark and menacing and somehow eerily attractive. They found a *prahu* amongst the trees and dragged it over the sand. Jordeyne glanced out to where the white breakers on the reef were frolicking sibilantly together as they raced into the sanctuary of quieter waters.

Launched smoothly, the *prahu* glided serenely over the moon-clear shallows.

"I'm putting myself in your hands," said Bernardine, jocularly, his voice echoing through the tepid stillness of the night.

And Jordeyne was thinking desperately—"I've a fortnight more of Pulo Kundo——"

For twenty minutes they paddled swiftly over the water's milky quietude. The jungle-fringed shore and the intermittent lights of distant *Kampongs* receded in a dim mass. Their objective—the main reef to westward—stood out clearly in the cobalt haze.

"Always been afraid of blood pressure," Jordeyne heard Bernardine droning as the *prahu* skimmed gracefully into a channel of calm water. A cohort of sea-mews, disturbed by their approach, rose abruptly from the reef and drifted away into the starlit expanse beyond.

"You swim here often?" Bernardine asked.

"Often," lied Jordeyne, surveying the neighbouring surface. He was gauging the extent of the risk he was taking by adopting a complacent attitude and by entering the doubtful waters first. His policy of encouragement was being successful. He could see that Bernardine had no further doubts and was confidently preparing for the swim. They secured the *prahu* to an escarpment of the reef and commenced to undress. In the moonlight Bernardine appeared a barrel-like figure. A fat jovial apparition, he was ready to enjoy the swim fully. The husky voice poured forth a continuous commentary——

Jordeyne threw off his singlet and again glanced at the encircling surface. Only the previous week he had seen a couple of fins thirty yards from the portion of rock on which he was now standing. The ominous swirl of a scavenging shark was a commonplace sight in those warm depths. The vicinity of the reef was notorious among the natives for the presence of sharks and sting rays. He was taking a supreme risk in entering these troubled waters at all. With an ostentatious display of *sangfroid* he prepared to dive. Simultaneously a query entered his brain: why was he doing this, when he could so easily have taken Bernardine to the sheltered swimming-grounds of the lagoon? For what purpose was he taking his life thus, in his hands?

Discarding such inopportune queries he dived from the reef. A moment later Bernardine was a grampus-like object in the darkish water beside

him. The temperature of the water was pleasantly cool and refreshing. Bernardine was in his element.

"Quite delightful, Jordeyne," he shouted, in the middle of a somersault. But Jordeyne's attention was wholly distracted. His eyes were focussed intently on the stretch of water to their right. It was from that direction, he knew, that sharks came into the calm but deep regions inside the reef. Reassuring himself that the monsters were absent on this occasion, he swam out a short distance from the reef and looked around to see Bernardine following him with increasing zeal. For ten minutes they disported themselves in those incalculable depths. Then Jordeyne led the way back to the reef. The level surface of the water was everywhere still unbroken. The utmost tranquillity reigned outside the line of white foam. Only a sea-mew's cry, and the boom of the breakers, disturbed the silence of the night.

"The best dip I've had for years," exclaimed Bernardine heartily, reaching for a towel in the *prahu*. "I must remember this spot. The paddling alone will soon get me into condition."

Wraith-like in the moonbeams, they entered the *prahu* and returned placidly to the island.

*

*

*

THE following night, when *makan* was over, they again sat smoking in the verandah porch. A transient breeze from seaward soughed in the casuarinas bordering the bungalow steps. The calm monotony of the hour was relieved by its

soft caress. Fireflies danced daintily across the verandah, dazzling the eyes by their flippant coruscations.

"What about a swim?" Bernardine asked abruptly. Jordeyne had been waiting for the question. His mind, filled with a dark hazard, had a premonitory glimpse of Bernardine's restless plans.

"I'm a little off colour. I don't think I'll go along to-night," he answered evenly, his voice contracting his heart's excitement.

"Take some physic and sleep," Bernardine idly advised, adding vivaciously——

"I'll get to the reef all right. The paddling will make a new man of me. I felt fine last night."

"You'll find the boat on the beach," Jordeyne remarked calmly.

Five minutes later he was listening carefully to Bernardine's retreating footsteps. Between the moonlit palms he caught a final view of the tubby figure putting the *prahu* afloat. Then complete silence filled the bungalow. Only the frightened snarl of a pariah-dog made itself heard in the empty compound. As he smoked a series of cheroots, Jordeyne found the darkened chaos of his thoughts breaking beyond the bounds of his normal imagination. Almost subconsciously, he pictured Bernardine's progress across the white waters to the foam-crested reef, the sea-mews rising in alarm at his approach.

He began to mutter to himself, incoherently.

"I can never leave Pulo Kundo. I'm unfit for civilization. He's reached those dark depths by now. They'll not transfer me afterwards. He's the obstacle. He's dived from the reef—turning somersaults——"

At dawn the Chinese 'boy' found him shouting hysterically, his eyes blazing with the onset of madness.

Bernardine had not returned.

"That fellow Bernardine—he's taken the *prahu*, gone off to the reef—getting his weight down—he's headstrong, been away a long time now——"





XXII. PICNIC AT ELEPHANTA

As she powdered her face astutely before the mirror, Elizabeth Quayle felt a surge of excitement at the days pleasures to be. Elephanta ! The very name itself had a prehistoric ring about it. Her aunt Euphemia had instigated the outing. It was to be a small party of garrison folk—Colonel Mordaunt and his niece Sylvia, Major Entwistle and that subaltern with the blue eyes whose acquaintance she had made last week in the polka at the Governor's ball, a nice-mannered solicitous youth who would have brought her a reservoir of sarsaparilla had she wished it. Miss Primm, the lady from the library, had also been invited. Miss

Primm was a lively spinster with an aristocratic nose and a reputation for being alcoholically inclined ; it was rumoured that she had been carried on board the packet at Suez under unseemly circumstances, and frequently, under the influence of cherry brandy, she had been known to flick bread pellets at meals. To complete the party, there was her aunt's husband, Aubrey Lord. Elizabeth always felt a sense of pity for Uncle Aubrey. His position in the Army Stores Department bordered on the demesne of the boxwallah rather than on the realms of good soldiery. He was not the sort of man one met often at Government House dinners, a fact which Euphemia had found supremely humiliating. Elizabeth knew that her aunt's favourite bedside reading—while Aubrey snored porcinely beside her—consisted of *Wuthering Heights* and the *Government House Gazette*. She found thwarted depths of passion in the former, and while reading the latter she derived pleasure from imagining herself the centre of a fashionable galaxy, the flame drawing the moths—in the shape of sprucely groomed members of the services—towards her radiant self. Poor Aubrey ! Since, under the influence of too much loving cup, he had proposed to Euphemia in an Earls Court drawing-room some years before, his stature had seemed to shrink visibly, for Euphemia was beyond everything a domineering snob. Her friend, Colonel Mordaunt, in his best Madeira mood had nicknamed her Betsy Trotwood, and the humblest '*Chaprassi*' went in terror of her dragonish glance.

Aubrey was as plastic in her hands as the Maltese terrier she owned.

It was already very warm. Elizabeth carefully dabbed the prickly heat powder on her neck. Within less than three months the sticky Bombay climate had accomplished its measure of havoc with her once rosy complexion. Her boudoir table was now a chaos of prophylactics—a vanguard against the hostile forces of the Presidency weather—secured from the apothecary's upon her aunt's discerning advice. Bile-beans and breath-sweeteners, hartshorn and Cologne water, deodorizers and Doctor Smailey's world-renowned assuaging lotion for tropical eruptions, all usurped the toilet space. In spite of the state of her skin Elizabeth was not dissatisfied with her reflection in the mirror. The ayah had brushed her hair rigorously, causing it to crackle excitingly under the stiff bristles. Her crinoline, lately arrived by the packet, hung nicely and was eminently a delight to the eye; her bodice, she knew, was taut and alluring, her bonnet with its wistaria trimming caught her glance pleasurably. "I've a better figure than Sylvia Mordaunt has," she decided with confidence. She had just finished putting the drops into her eyes and was about to tie her bonnet strings when the door behind her opened brusquely and her aunt appeared.

*

*

*

"Dearest Elizabeth!"

A tall, buxom woman with painted lips swept forward.

"I'm so excited, Aunt Phemie. Miss Primm says the sculptures are superb."

"Why, my child, your eyes are lustre-less."

"But, aunt, I've used the drops this minute."

"When I was your age I had the finest orbs in all Earls Court and they lit up doubly at the sight of anything in trousers. Let me titivate you, my dear. Its the final touches that count. A little powder under the chin——"

Elizabeth allowed herself to be re-groomed by her aunt's deft touch, while a torrent of advice poured forth from those scarlet lips.

"Its vivacity a man admires most in a woman. I was always full of life myself, though, since I married your Uncle Aubrey, I've become a damp squib. Come and sit by me on the bed, my dear, there's something I want to say to you."

Seated beside her aunt, Elizabeth felt herself timidly mouse-like and insignificant. Euphemia Lord's floridity had the effect of dimming the surroundings. Her crinoline had a confusion of roses embroidered upon it ; her bonnet was riotous, her parasol a trumpet of gaiety. A complicated mass of bows and ribbons set off her turban-like coiffure.

"Its about Major Entwistle, my dear."

The name called up to Elizabeth a vision of a bow-legged undersized saheb who had danced execrably at the recent Ball, an arrogant individual from whom she had found it difficult to hide her distaste during the dance.

"He was asking me especially about you, my dear. He seemed most interested. He's a really

remarkable man. They say he once fought three Pathans together and disposed of them all, and you know a Pathan's arms are as big as most men's thighs. A tremendously courageous man, my dear. I hear he's a Maharatta scholar, too, and shortly to be promoted to the Governor's staff."

Elizabeth smiled wanly. Her aunt's face was a firmament of design. She wondered if she would next tell her Major Entwistle's size in collars.

"Do be kind to him, my dear. I want you to make the best of your trip."

The euphemism made Elizabeth smile. It was difficult for her to be otherwise than kind, since she had purposely been brought half way across the globe to be useful to some undesignated male. But that belligerent little man was too repulsive from every aspect. She would have to be tactful and simulate acquiescence.

"I rely implicitly on you, dearest Elizabeth. Now I must hurry, the *chaprassis* are waiting."

Mrs. Lord rose, pinched Elizabeth's cheeks, shook out her crinoline, and glided from the room. A moment later her voice could be heard raised authoritatively in the servants' quarters.

* * *

ARRANGEMENTS for the picnic had been carried out with great thoroughness, Euphemia Lord being the moving spirit in all things. She had flirted to good effect with the admiral and a small paddle-steamer from the dockyard had been obtained. In the stern the *hamals* sat guarding the provisions, their bright orange turbans a pool of

colour against the morning's cobalt rim. Elizabeth, staring beyond the menials, found herself watching the traffic of Arab *dhow*s, whose rusty brown sails bellied gently at the breeze's intermittent whim. Illusive in the haze, how much more romantic than the packet they were! with their hoary Mecca-bound pilgrims and their treasure-trove from the Hadramaut. Had not the Queen of Sheba travelled in a *dhow*? Maybe they were coursed for the lands near Sinai—she thought nostalgically of the mountain as she had seen it in the sunset after embarking at Suez. The knife-keen escarpments, stained blood-red and of an appalling austerity, had imbued in her a terrifying wonder.

The boat was drifting slowly from the pier. Soon the ladies' dresses responded to the chugging of the engine and the paddles commenced to rotate rhythmically. A cluster of sea-mews hovered predaciously over the wake.

"You can see Elephanta in the mist, Miss Quayle." Elizabeth turned and saw the blue-eyed subaltern standing beside her. He was very handsome, and she compared him to an illustration of Rawdon Crawley she had lately seen.

"Over there, its like a whale's back."

Elizabeth followed his gaze and was aware for the first time of the contours of Elephanta. The island sprawled heavily across the misty horizon, a grey sluggish-looking monster. Behind it, in a halcyon calm, the majestic outline of the Western Ghats was capped by golden cumuli.

"I'm so excited," she said, "Miss Primm declares the carvings are marvellous."

"You've never asked me my name," said the subaltern. She was about to say Rawdon but checked herself in time. Her sudden conception of heaven was a drive down the Esplanade in a smart landau accompanied by this young man.

"Its Wilbraham."

"What a nice name! Its not very common, is it?"

"Freddie Wilbraham. My uncle has the title," the subaltern said simply.

Elizabeth was impressed. She was sure Euphemia Lord was unaware of that fact. She shook her curls daintily and began to make polite talk. It was sometimes hard work pumping for conversation with the military.

"Do you like reading, Mr. Wilbraham?"

"I haven't had much time for it since the Bhils began troubling us."

"Miss Primm has the latest number of *All the Year Round*. There's a new instalment of Mr. Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. Such a thrilling narrative!"

Miss Primm, who was sitting opposite with Aubrey Lord, heard her name mentioned.

"Have you read Mr. Thackeray in the last *Cornhill*? she asked. "Most amusing. We have it at the library. He will surely titillate you. Look, my dears, do I see a dolphin?"

A faint commotion amongst the lumpy, blue wavelets attracted their attention. They all

crowded to the rail with childish delight.

* * *

THE island at close quarters was no Elysium. The ladies were visibly daunted by its forbidding aspect. Its flanks appeared to be chaotic with steamy jungle, while the foreshore afforded no temperate harbours. A chain of arid rocks surrounded the anchorage.

"The *Chaprassis* must find a shady grove," Enphemia Lord announced imperiously as they stepped ashore. And the men, wavering under the stout memsaheb's steely eyes, cast off their betel-chewing lethargy and duly found an isolated peepul tree, under which they commenced to spread out the repast on a large Persian carpet. "An admirable women," thought Colonel Mordaunt, observing Euphemia's ubiquitous hustle. The Colonel had been a widower for many years and was constantly searching subconsciously for a new mate. He greatly admired Euphemia's June-esque physique. He felt that somehow with her the autumn of his life might be postponed and retirement at Cheltenham a thing to be relished. She could make a wonderful chutney, too. It was a calamity that she should have espoused that worm from the Stores Department——

At that instant the *worm* in question, looking slightly ridiculous in his bottle-green jacket, was enjoying himself in conversation with Miss Primm, who, in the barren desert of female society in Bombay, found herself regarded as a passable oasis by middle-aged males.

"Phemie's brought a very fine claret," he told her meaningly.

"*Magnifique*," said Miss Primm boisterously, her tongue avaricious with thirst. "I'm dry as a dromedary."

Elizabeth sat down swan-like near a '*chaprassi*' who was acting as '*punkawallaḥ*' and Freddie Wilbraham hastened to join her. Opposite to them Major Entwistle was ostentatiously placing cushions for Sylvia Mordaunt to sit upon. "A bow-legged unbedworthy creature"—mused Miss Primm, covertly observing him—"One of those diminutive persons who, because of their noticeable lack of stature, assume an air of unforgivable impudence towards the World——"

"Be careful of rock scorpions, Miss Mordaunt," the Major was saying, and the girl smiled coquettishly, a faint flame of devilry in her eyes.

The ladies tucked napkins into their bodices. They began to feed. It was indeed a '*burra Khana*.' Curry puffs and semosis, rounds of beef, truffled sausages and perigord pies, mangoes and plantains were spread before them in profusion. Colonel Mordaunt poured a liberal measure of wine into each glass. Then he seated himself comfortably next to Euphemia Lord, whose eyes were as full of sparkle as the sheen on the sea. "A vivacious, well-preserved woman"—he decided—"moreover, a capable female who could attend to one's wardrobe with greater discrimination than Moslem '*bearer*'——. He glanced across at his niece Sylvia, a pretty chit, but self-sufficient and con-

sequential and inclined to be vixenish at times. He could see that upstart Entwistle was attracted by her. If anything came of it, and the fellow became the Governor's right-hand men—as was rumoured—well, the girl would be off his hands for good and he would be free to——

“An admirable wine, my dear Phemia,” he smirked, raising a toast to her scintillant eyes, and Euphemia Lord (how she wished Aubrey could grow whiskers like the Colonel's !) cast a roguish smile back at him. It was an effort to do so, for she was out of temper. Elizabeth had allowed that flirtations hussy Sylvia to monopolise Major Entwistle. Her well-laid plans were going astray. She took a long draught of wine and attempted to conceal the angry frown which played about her countenance as she watched the mutual friendliness growing between the Major and Sylvia. What was Elizabeth doing—chattering gaily with that insignificant lad with the blue eyes ? It was Sylvia whom she had scheduled as the subaltern's bait.

“Krishna's my favourite idol,” Miss Primm was exclaiming loudly. “I love his flute-playing posture and his superb torso.” (The other ladies glanced apprehensively towards her. Miss Primm used such quaint words). Then, sipping from her glass, she added—“A very nice vintage, Aubrey.”

“You've got our Stores Department to thank for that,” Aubrey Lord returned a trifle bibulously, his felicity being quelled immediately by a dark scowl from his wife. He knew he had committed

a blunder by mentioning the Stores Department and would suffer for it later. Euphemia was very trying nowadays, so different from the high-spirited, wellcovered wench of Earls Court memories. It was very difficult for him to live up to her hero Heathcliff in that Bronte story. To be a great lover was not his *metier*. A bachelor's life had its advantages, he ruminated with alcoholic sadness.

The claret circulated freely as they peeled the luscious Presidency mangoes. The wine and the heat combined to make Miss Primm's nose a roseate prominence. She was already genteely light-headed and involuntarily gripped Aubrey Lord's sleeve.

"The caves are very dark and bat-haunted," she purred, "You'll be my guide, Aubrey, won't you?"

"Very willingly, Miss Primm. A great pleasure," he muttered, his eyes hypnotised by that omnipotent feature.

Elizabeth and her subaltern alone drank sparingly of the wine. They were too delighted with each other's presence to be preoccupied with the demands of appetite. He realised that she reminded him of the English countryside, of apple orchards and honeysuckle. Ever since he had danced with her at the Ball she had been uppermost in his thoughts. She seemed to him fresh and unspoilt, unlike that green-eyed minx Sylvia Mordaunt, who allowed males to travel as far as they could go with her—without breaking the canons of a gentleman—and then repulsed them with frigid haughtiness. That old trout Entwistle

would be fooled as most of the subalterns had been. Elizabeth, on her part, was anxious about her physical self. Unaware of the unwonted sparkle in her eyes, she inwardly questioned the efficacy of her aunt's eye drops against the all-conquering sunlight. She doubted whether the prickly heat powder would be effective in such humidity. Freddie, who was adorable, would certainly be repulsed by the sight of her perspiring pores. As Miss Primm had pedantically remarked, the day was very *sudorific*. But Freddie, she comforted herself, had shown no signs of noticing her defects. He talked freely of many things—of his duties and the Bhil campaign, of his home in the Cotswolds, of the hydrophobia at Brighton, of his gouty bachelor uncle whose heir he was, of the immensity of de Lesseps work, and, to her great satisfaction, he had even admired the wistaria trimming in her sunbonnet. She had seen her aunt scowl irately in her direction several times, but the fact did not disturb her unduly. She knew that Freddie's valetudinarian uncle would soon cause Euphemia Lord to look with favour upon Freddie, for a title to Aunt Phemie was an exhilarating as a sniff of salvolatile.

Beyond them, Sylvia Mordaunt was listening as ardently as she could to Major Entwistle's tales of his prowess at *shikar*. It did not intrigue her to know that a man should never shoot a teal coming towards him, and the habits of the lesser bustard also failed to impress her. Nor was she interested in Palmerston's politics. But the narrator entirely

held her attention. She had heard that he was going to be promoted to Government House staff, that he had extensive private means and good connections, that he might soon be ranked as a '*burra saheb*' in the Presidency society—and to be a '*burra memsaheb*' was an attractive prospect. Perhaps she might even drive to banquets in a phaeton bedecked with native troopers. The very thought of such a dashing equipage, with silken rains and emblazoned panels, caused her eyes to glisten. She would be free, too, of her often cantankerous uncle. With her social prestige she could then afford to be patronising to the Colonel's platonic friend Euphemia Lord, an attitude she would find pleasing so she was at heart a little afraid of Euphemia's acid tongue. The Major, she considered, had his good points. Though he danced the cotillion without skill, he showed commendable energy. If his teeth were straightened and he wore higher heels to his shoes, he would be quite presentable. His features were proud and severe and she felt altogether capable of moulding him into a tolerable type of husband——

The gentlemen, with the permission of the ladies, lit their cheroots. At that moment a number of fishing folk arrived with four '*dhoolies*' and the task of settling the ladies in the chairs was undertaken. Miss Primm, a little unsteady on her feet, had some difficulty with her appendages, but with Aubrey Lord's amicable assistance she was finally seated to her satisfaction and, to her huge delight, borne upward on the bronzen shoulders of two

'*Kolis*.' Her sensations she afterwards described as being 'positively Daedalian.' Tulip-like under her flamboyant parasol she chatted incessantly to Aubrey Lord who, bravely keeping pace with the '*dhooly*,' fanned her in gallant fashion. They were discussing the island's coleoptera. Behind them came Euphemia Lord escorted by the Colonel. The walk to the caves, he grumbled inwardly, wiping the inside of his gold-braided white topi, was no easy matter for a man of his age, under the noon-day tropical sun, and without the benefits of his customary siesta. If he hadn't kept himself thoroughly fit by taking all things with moderation—*mens sana in corpore sano* and all that—he would have been in a predicament.

Major Entwistle and Sylvia Mordaunt had gone far ahead and had already turned the bend of the jungle path when Elizabeth and Freddie started the slow climb. Elizabeth again found herself thrilled by the primitive surroundings. She had just seen a platoon of monkeys. The noontide was alive with the cicada's humming; birds of bright plumage flashed meteorically through the undergrowth, and the butterflies were enchanting. She looked down from the '*dhooly*' and saw Freddie's blue eyes admiringly fixed upon her. She felt intensely happy.

*

*

*

THE caves were sinisterly impressive. A faint pervasive odour of joss-sticks emanated from their mouths. As Miss Primm darkly remarked to Aubrey Lord, the very wings of Azrael seemed to

hover above one in those gloomy recesses. Miss Primm was buoyed up with her own felicity. It was a long time since anyone had called her by her Christian name (so long that she had almost forgotten it herself) but Aubrey Lord had done so. He had said sententiously, holding her arm with some delicacy.

“Step warily, Miss Charlotte.”

The caves gave her an immense sense of exhilaration, half terror and half amazement. They reminded her of an illustration of a Burns’ poem which she had mortally feared in her girlhood days. The picture depicted the hero’s timely escape on horseback from Lucifer and his minions. Unconsciously she repeated the caption remembered from those far off times—

“And scarcely had he Maggie rallied
When out the hellish legion sallied.”

She saw Aubrey glance at her in surprise.

“That couplet was above a picture on my school-room wall,” she explained abruptly. “It used to make me hide my head under the sheets, and Elephanta has the same effect. It always frightens me.” A reverential melancholy had settled on her features.

“Take my arm, Charlotte,” encouraged Aubrey Lord, “there’s nothing to fear.” He found Charlotte Primm a good sort. He felt at ease with her as he never did with Euphemia. She hung on to him tightly and the tears welled into her eyes. They were not altogether alcoholic tears, for she was remembering the occasion long ago at Liverpool

when a man—a sea-captain in the China trade—had been about to propose marriage to her and, frustrating everything at that crucial moment, her aunt had brazenly entered the parlour——

“I feel safe with you, Aubrey,” she said, clinging to him with a burr-like tenacity as they penetrated further into the cave. The intricately carved frescoes were breath-takingly weird. The skulls around Shiva’s neck caused Miss Primm to shudder fearfully. The ‘*trimurti*’ containing Brahma, serene on his lotus, held her spellbound. Frenziedly she asked Aubrey to take her from that saturnine darkness. They turned a corner and ten yards away a sunlit tableau met their vision. Major Entwistle was on his knees suppliant before Sylvia Mordaunt. Miss Primm giggled, then they withdrew silently along the sultry pathway, leaving the Major and Sylvia unaware of their presence.

* * *

In the fourth cave Colonel Mordaunt had been ill at ease. Exhausted from his climb and fervent from too much wine, he had behaved in an unorthodox and deplorable manner. With unaccustomed impudence he had asked Euphemia how she had brought herself to marry Aubrey Lord. The unkindness of the question did not strike him until he saw the strained expression on her countenance. He had wounded her feelings inexorably ; he had acted without decorum, as no saheb should have done. Instead of replying she began to cry silently. The Colonel’s words exposed the grey failure of her social ambitions. She knew that Aubrey—harm-

less, hardworking little man !—was not regarded as a '*pukka saheb*' by the regiment. She knew that she was an object of pity. She continued to weep in mute despair until the Colonel placed his arm about her waist. He then discarded all restraint. She heard his words with a sudden shock.

"Phemia, come away with me," he urged heatedly, mentioning the date of the packet's sailing. Her bodice was moist with her tears. She tried to recover her composure and anger rapidly replaced her unhappiness. The picnic had been a horrible experience, a dismal failure. Nothing had turned out as she wished. Elizabeth had not even glanced twice at the Major, while that chit Sylvia—how she hated her !—had behaved towards him like a common trollop. And Aubrey had encouraged that Primm woman to drink too freely——

She suppressed her sobs and looked the Colonel straight in the face with cold intensity.

"A pleasant proposition to put to a lady," she said, her voice thin with acid sarcasm. "You've been mislead by the wine, Colonel Mordaunt." She saw him subside completely. Overcome with shame, he looked at her furtively and began to apologize in a manner abject and baffled. He was at a loss to understand the female mind. Their platonic friendship was a chimera which apparently counted for nothing. He smoothed his moustache nervously and blamed the brutifying powers of drink.

"We must find the others," he heard her murmur in a listless tone.

They emerged from the cave guiltily.

*

*

*

ELIZABETH trembled a little before the door of her aunt's boudoir. She feared it would be a case of the tantrums, since Euphemia Lord had scarcely spoken on the journey back from Elephanta. It was almost as if she had suffered from the '*mal de mer*.' She had stared despondently at the sunset, her face a mask of rage and misery. Elizabeth shuddered, like a child awaiting chastisement. She could not very well burst in upon her aunt and convey jubilantly to her the fact that Freddie would some day be an esteemed member of the Lords. She must impart the news gently; it was her duty to make amends, being the cause of her aunt's unhappiness. A tear trickled down her cheek as she knocked softly on the door. Timidly she entered the room. Euphemia Lord was powdering her face angrily before the mirror.

"I've come to thank you, aunt, for the picnic. It was lovely. I *did* enjoy myself. The carvings _____"

Her aunt snorted, flourishing the mascara.

"Have you the *malaise*, aunt?"

"I've nothing of the sort. The picnic was loathsome."

Elizabeth penitent, ran forward and buried her face in her aunt's crinoline.

"Its my fault. Forgive me, aunt Phemie. But Freddie's not what you think he is."

Her aunt turned from the mirror and surveyed her with stern, enquiring eyes.

“He’s—he’s going to be a—”

A cheerful knock sounded on the door and Aubrey Lord entered. In his hand he carried a buff-coloured envelope.

“We’ve been invited to dinner at Government House,” he announced with abnormal self-assurance. He handed his wife the letter with a flourish which savoured of victory. As she read the contents, Euphemia’s expression changed to one of pleasure. She beamed radiantly upon them, her woes forgotten. Aubrey, for once, had justified his existence.



XXIII. ALANNAH'S DAY

THE Collector, who was an Irishman, had christened her with the name of Alannah, and in those early days he had been tolerant towards herself and her tribe. He had given a standing order to the *mali* that peanuts and other dainties should be ready to hand when he took his pre-breakfast stroll in the compound. Alannah and her mate—a self-conscious fellow who spent much of his time grooming himself and seeking out inconveniences on his person—were soon won over by the Collector's delicacies and they duly passed on word to their numerous offspring that a mortal with extreme altruistic tendencies, and well worth cultivating, was resident nearby. It was not long before the trees around the Collector's bungalow became a monkeys' paradise, a sort of simian Clapham Junction.

For some weeks the Collector viewed the morning caperings of the tribe with amused benignity.

"What airy grace!" he was won't to say to his wife, a large buxom woman of ungainly appearance, as he threw the animals a fistful of peanuts.

"What perfection of movement!" he would remark injudiciously while Mrs. Collector, who suffered from rheumatism and walked with difficulty, would merely glare at him and repeat tersely—

"Harry, you're making a laughing-stock of yourself over those creatures. The *chokras* in the bazar suspect you of having a tail yourself,"

"What rhythm!" signed the Collector, ignoring her and gazing up at his furry friends as they turned ecstatic somersaults among the scented foliage of the *buch* trees, their greyish velvet bodies glistening in the patches of sunlight.

But a change in his attitude was soon to come. It set in about the time of the Admiral's visit. The Admiral, it appeared, had been surprised to find on his dressing-table an intimate portrait of Mrs. Collector in her more youthful days. He had also been extremely chagrined at losing his gold cuff links and a pair of braces.

Alannah had been rightly credited with all these misdemeanours. The cuff links were eventually found by the *mali* in a bed of cannas. Soon afterwards Alannah was caught red-handed by the bearer in the act of carrying off a silver-framed photograph of the Collector's grandmother. This the *bhisti* discovered, deposited in a manure heap.

It was then realised that Alannah and her relations had definitely become a menace: such rampant kleptomania could not be tolerated. Something had to be done, the Collector decided—

*

*

*

PIR KHAN, a most reliable and estimable overseer in the Public Works Department, was seated opposite the Collector in the latter's office.

"Shooting, of course, is out of the question"—the Collector was saying, as he stroked a grizzled

pate—"but I was wondering if you could entice the tribe, early one morning, into a lorry netted with wire and take the pack of them fifty miles out into the Bhil Forest and maroon them there."

Pir Khan was puzzled.

"What does your Honour mean by *maroon*, please?"

The Collector ruminated for a moment.

"Maroon? well, stray the creatures, abandon them, get rid of them quickly."

"But, your Honour, they are domesticated monkeys," objected Pir Khan with a doubtful look. "The jungly-wallah monkeys would not be habituated to their *jat*. There would be no harmony, saheb."

"Never mind," said the Collector, "they'll take to the forest like a duck to water. The jungle is their natural habitat. They'll be in their element there. Picture them, dancing through the dappled leaves, accomplishing acrobatic feats far beyond their scope here. The jungle is the place for them. Besides, they've taken advantage of our hospitality here, they've become a pack of marauders. And we can't have Admirals losing their braces in suspicious circumstances."

Pir Khan muttered uneasily—

"The animals, your Honour, are regarded as holy by many in the local bazar."

The Collector scratched his head and shouted—

"Sacred or not, we must get rid of them. Do it secretly. Coax them into the lorry with cashew nuts at dawn. Once you get Alannah—you'll soon

distinguish Alannah! She's a veritable Tarabai among her tribe—the rest will follow without difficulty. I put my utmost reliance on yourself, Pir Khan, and look to you to rid me of this grievous pest within the next twenty-four hours."

Pir Khan rose politely from his seat, judging by the scowl on the Collector's face that further expostulations were of no avail.

"As you say, your Honour, it shall be done *sub rosa*."

"Good," said the Collector, turning to his files.

*

*

*

It was noon the following day when the specially wired municipal lorry reached the dark confines of the Bhil Forest. The task of capturing Alannah and her family had been comparatively easy, but the secrecy demanded of the job had not been attained, even though dawn was only breaking at the time of the manoeuvre. Alannah's loud chattering had attracted a crowd of early risers and before her enforced departure a horde of *chokras* had gathered before the Collector's bungalow. Their inquisitive gossip, mingled with the accompanying simian commotion, considerably unsettled Pir Khan, who was glad to get away safely before he had the whole bazar round his lorry. On the fifty miles journey the cargo was well behaved. Besides the driver, Pir Khan had taken one assistant whose duty it was at intervals to appease the monkeys with appetising food. The animals, however, soon became languid and bewildered in the heat of the journey. Even Alannah's natural

boisterousness was subdued and she could not summon up sufficient interest to share in her mate's grooming processes.

Pir Khan finally bade the driver to stop the lorry at what he considered to be the most primitive part of the rough jungle track. It was burdensomely hot and he wiped his brow wearily : secretly he considered that the job was one for the Goal Department and not for the Public Works. On the other hand, he reflected, he might get promotion for carrying out his unorthodox task satisfactorily. Imperiously he commanded the assistant to take down the wire netting on the lorry and to release the monkeys.

With an untoward outburst of chattering, Alannah and her family found themselves free. In the space of a few moments the members of the group had swung themselves with great agility into the masses of dense jungle verdure.

Pir Khan gave a sigh of satisfaction and then ordered the assistant to prepare his *khana* under a pleasantly shady tree. The driver brought forth his *betel* bag and a *martler* of cool drinking water. As he consumed his curry and chapatis Pir Khan decided that the outing was less arduous, even less derogatory, than he had anticipated. He chatted cheerfully to his two subordinates throughout the meal, after which the three of them chose suitable sites for a well-earned siesta.

Very soon the trio could be heard snoring contentedly.

*

*

*

PIR KHAN was the first to awake. As he rubbed his eyes and returned to full consciousness a familiar sound fell upon his hearing. He glanced towards the lorry but he could not believe what he saw.

Alannah and her family were resolutely ensconced in the vehicle! Aimlessly conversing together, they resembled passengers waiting patiently for a bus to start.

Pir Khan gave a loud and not very decorous exclamation and prodded his two recumbent companions.

"Do you see what I see?" he shouted, blinking his eyes as the couple awakened slowly.

"Its the monkeys come back!" cried the driver incredulously. Pir Khan then lost his temper.

"Get them out quickly! Maroon them!" he shouted to the other two.

But Alannah and her mates were having none of it: they adopted a hostile attitude from the start; they bared their teeth menacingly and presented a stout, united front, chattering polemically all the while. The assistant was lucky to escape with his fingers intact——

It was dark when the lorry returned to the Collector's bungalow. Its arrival had not passed unnoticed, and within ten minutes a crowd had gathered. The word went round rapidly that the monkeys and Pir Khan were back. Hanuman *Ki Jai!* A tremendous din arose. It seemed as if Alannah and her family were good-naturedly acknowledging the crowd's ovation. Then suddenly a large car appeared at the gate of the com-

pound. The Collector and his wife were visible in its comfortable depths. The Collector leant out—

“*Kya Hai?*” he demanded sternly.

“Its the monkeys, your Honour,” mumbled Pir Khan shamefacedly.

The Collector's wife laughed shrilly.

“What airy grace!” she exclaimed, gazing meaningly into her husband's eyes. The Collector winced.

“All right, release the creatures, and get this crowd away,” he ordered testily.

Alannah's picnic was over.



XXIV. DEATH AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

IT was sunset when Chaluay arose from the cockpit enclosure, and, carrying his bird protectively under his arm, set out along the track to the lighthouse. He was pleased with himself, for his bird had been victorious in three contests that afternoon. He stroked its feather affectionately in token of the money and the honour it had just brought to him. He knew that the village elders were of the opinion that the cock was a *srawah*, a bird undoubtedly of a divine origin, the forthcoming champion of the Javanese isles.

Its markings and its impressive comb were those of a conqueror, and on the middle claws of its flexible feet were already the rings of many conquests.

"Thou art a creditable bird," he told it warmly and the cock agreed with a gurgle of contentment and a flicker of its drowsy eyes, for the pugnacity and the lust for battle had gone from it when the sharp, lethal spurs had been removed from its legs. A rice cake and a long sleep were now its sole objectives.

Chaluay, his pockets full of the coins he had won, could still hear the sounds of the gamelan music as he reached the crest of the hill. The jungle path to the lighthouse began here. It was

an awe-inspiring route on a dark night. Were there not *boetas* in plenty, hiding in the giant trees which spread their liana-clad limbs as if they were eager to clutch at any intruder's throat? But Chaluay, having placated the demons with cinnamon seeds that morning, strode forward with assurance. The moon which did not favour the antics of the *boetas*, had risen and he knew that soon his own master, the Creator of Light, would have his devil in action, sweeping the jungle-fringed bay with its powerful beams. Chaluay regarded his master, Mijnheer Van Kleest, as a very great man, second only to the village *doekoen* who alone could regulate the voices of the fighting cocks by his magic throat prescriptions. The Mijnheer had been on the island for several years and Chaluay had been his servant at the lighthouse ever since his arrival. The natives on the island respected the Mijnheer as the *tuan besar* and Creator of Light. They seldom regarded him for what he was, a rather lazy widower, overfond of beer, rystaffel and sleep. The monotonous routine of a lighthouse keeper's life on one of the remoter Javanese islands, increased his natural indolence.

As Chaluay came to the final stage of the jungle track he caught a glimpse of the lagoon across the bay. Through the stems of the trees he could see a wide stretch of moonlit water.

A moment later he saw an amazing sight. There was a subdued humming in the air and a machine bird settled down gracefully on the sheltered surface of the lagoon, a short distance away from the

beach. Chaluay rubbed his eyes in astonishment. Only once before had he seen a machine-bird. It had been the property of a *tuan besar* from Sourabaya, a resplendent individual who had come to inspect the island. For five minutes Chaluay watched the strange object. He saw two figures emerge from it and enter a small round boat.

They were rowing toward the shore in the moonlight. . .

Chaluay, tucking his bird safely inside his coat, ran excitedly to the lighthouse.

* * *

HE found Mijnheer Van Kleest lying somnolently on a long chair in the living room at the base of the light house.

Excitedly he told him of the machine-bird's arrival.

His master, an abnormally corpulent Hollander, gazed dully at him. At last he laughed boisterously, his fat cheeks pendulous with mirth.

"You've been boozing again, Chaluay. Your bird may be a Fuhrer of its kind but you mustn't celebrate its conquests too copiously. In Holland in such circumstances we sometimes see snakes but never machine-birds. Now go, get me a beer."

Chaluay guessed that it would be impossible to convince his master of his sobriety, particularly as his bird's most thrilling encounters had often paved the way for a congratulatory gathering where the arrack invariably flowed freely. On such occasions he had sometimes omitted to return punctually to prepare the Mijnheer's rystaffel. And, as a result,

the latter now attributed to his imagination the extraordinary vision he had seen of the machine-bird. He began to have doubts—once before, after imbibing too much arrack, he had observed the strangest thing—a double cockfight! He had certainly seen four birds in the enclosure when in reality only two were present—and now the Mijnheer said that, is such a condition, one sometimes saw snakes—*Mbe!* He would have to be careful.

But the two figures rowing towards the shore—surely they were not products of his imagination! Frowning, he kept the puzzle to himself.

While the Mijnheer consumed his beer and rystaffel Chaluay took up his bird and industriously groomed him. For a long time he massaged the broad muscles of its back, then he oiled and stroked its feathers until they glistened in the shadows. Finally he fed it on grain and ground coconut and when the bird, replete, subsided to rest in its basket, he set about cleaning the remnants of red pepper from the vicious spurs.

The wild excitement of the cockfight came back to him as he polished the sharp two-edged blades—the frenzied voices of the gamblers, the flapping of wings, the angry cackle of the adversaries, the violent screams of a bird with a trickle of red on its breast, the losing players pledging their Krises at the ringside, the incessant rhythm, intoxicating and entrancing, of the gamelan music, and, above all the rosy prospect of his bird victorious, maybe at Bali or Macassar——

His reverie was abruptly interrupted by the sound of loud knocking on the iron doorway. The Mijnheer, who had been dozing in his long chair, became fully alert.

"Who is it?" he cried nervously. Chaluay ran to his side.

"*Pinchuri, tuan!*" he whispered, convinced that dacoits had arrived.

The Mijnheer waddled to a cupboard and drew forth an unwieldy, old-fashioned pistol.

A staccato voice speaking broken Malay was audible from outside.

"Open quickly, or we fire the lock."

Chaluay perceived that his master had lost his nerve completely. His eyes were glazed with terror. Almost immediately there was a heavy explosion and the door was broken open. Out of the rising smoke two undersized Japanese soldiers confronted the Mijnheer and Chaluay who found themselves covered with revolvers. The Mijnheer's pistol was snatched roughly from his shaking hand. He was told to place his hands above his head.

Chaluay noticed that the soldiers carried daggers in their belts.

"Get us food. Go quickly," one of the Japanese ordered shrilly.

"Rystaffel all finished," Chaluay replied, pointing to an empty plate with gleeful impudence.

The Jap, sweeping the room with a furtive glance, turned his eyes greedily towards Chaluay's fighting cock in the basket.

"Kill it," he commanded arrogantly.

Chaluay's eyes narrowed with hatred. A great surge of anger suffused his brain. He made an obeisance to the Japanese and informed him that he would get his kris and kill the bird immediately. The Mijnheer saw him leave the room accompanied by the second soldier. When he returned there was a strange light in his eyes: he seemed to be unconscious of his actions. In his hand he carried a jewelled kris.

As he approached the fighting cock he commenced to dance in a semi-circle with slow rhythmical steps. The two Japanese stared at him, an expression of great surprise passing over their oblique, insolent eyes. It seemed to them that the Javanese was performing some quaint ritual before killing the bird; they were both mesmerically interested in the strangeness of his actions. By now Chaluay's face was contorted and his limbs moved with uncontrollable convulsive movements. The mazes of his footsteps began to assume a frenzied swirl. The Mijnheer then realised suddenly that the youth was in a state of *latah*. Once before he had seen Chaluay arrested by his friends while in such a condition, a medley of trance, magic and kris dance, not far removed from the state of *amok*.

And the Mijnheer was aware of its implications and consequences. The threat to his fighting cock had unbalanced Chaluay's mind. The Mijnheer deliberately averted his eyes from his servant's plight and watched the reactions of the Japanese. He knew that anything might happen, since the

onlooker is at the mercy of a victim of *latah*.

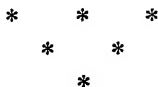
Already the Japs had the daggers from their belts and were accurately imitating the gestures of Chaluay whose movements now completely hypnotised the pair. Before his fierce stare their faces were drawn and apprehensive. Their bodies swayed to and fro according to his maniacal will. Spellbound at his gyrations they were like small animals impotent under a cobra's purposeful gaze.

Soon the Mijnheer beheld the climax. With horror he saw the soldiers almost simultaneously plunge their weapons—hara kiri fashion—into the pit of their stomachs. Silently they stumbled to the floor, no pain visible on their countenances.

Then the Mijnheer glanced back fearfully towards Chaluay. The youth had also fallen, mortally wounded by his kris, his arms outstretched towards his fighting cock in the basket. He was semi-conscious when the Mijnheer reached him and supported him in his trembling grip.

His chilling eyes rested fondly on the cock.

"Good bird," he whispered hoarsely before he fell back limply in his master's arms.





XXV. THE ISLAND

CALDECOTT'S first visit to the island occurred some years before he became its owner. He was then returning leisurely from furlough to a government post in India. A week's stay in Athens had resulted in a letter of introduction to Cyprian, lord of the island. Wearying of the Athenian dust, Caldecott decided to set out north to the sanctuary off the Euboean coast. He had been warned that Cyprian was eccentric in a pleasant, hospitable fashion. Mutual acquaintances had the habit of saying 'Poor Cyprian': and Caldecott gathered that his host-to-be was a charmingly helpless character. He learnt that he was a wealthy Anglophobe with a chaotic passion

for things Hellenic, that he discoursed interminably—and somewhat incoherently—on Venizelist politics to any guest who had the politeness to lend an ear to his dipsomaniacal rhetoric. But beneath this self-defensive ranting there was, according to some persons, a personality naively attractive. Women who had visited the island were invariably conquered by Cyprian's shy charm. They wanted, of course, to mother the young man.

So Caldecott, thus informed, set out across Attica to the lovely Euboean coast. By the time he had reached the train terminus in Euboea he was wholly captivated by the Grecian scene. It was Skye and the West of Ireland in a southern setting. The landscape had a similar faculty for frowning and smiling in quick succession. The cloud shadows moving slowly across the hillsides reminded him of flocks at pasture, and the blueness of the sea dazzled his vision. Cyprian had sent his car to the station. It was five miles to the little fishing village on the mainland facing the island. The road led through groves of olive and cypress, magpie-haunted in the noontide haze. Caldecott found his enchantment growing. His first glimpse of the island caused him to hold his breath with rapture. In the curve of the bay it sprawled languorously over the silver-topped blueness of the water. The saddle was wooded and, in the back-ground beyond the strait, a vista of dark mountains cleft the sky under patches of pure cumulus. Remoter still, a marmoreal ridge bespoke the slopes of Parnassus.

Cyprian's motor-launch was awaiting him. At the helm stood a boatman with the features of a Van Gogh peasant. Under his keen guidance the passage to the island took barely ten minutes. As they entered the little harbour Caldecott saw a tall figure standing motionless near the anchorage. He knew it to be Cyprian—Cyprian, sagging of frame in a canary-coloured sweater, his hair wind-tossed and long as a schoolgirl's to his cheeks, his countenance a little cadaverous, his complexion pale as moonlight.

They shook hands, introducing themselves awkwardly. Cyprian spoke with soft uneasiness. His eyes were bloodshot and desperately shy.

"You've had a comfortable journey?"

"Delightful," replied Caldecott. "I've been admiring the sheen of the olives. What a paradise you've got here!"

"It's nice," said Cyprian, "I'm a feudal relic in this land."

They made their way to the house through a formal garden enclosed by battlements. A cascade of bougainvillea hung from the verandah arches. Caldecott's eyes gleamed with envy as he viewed the vista from the loggia.

Cyprian was truly feudal on the island. A dozen retainers looked after his needs. He had his own bakery and made his own vintage of retsinata, which he alternated with the drinking of the more alcoholic ouzo. At their first meal he explained to Caldecott the various duties of the retainers.

"It's difficult to discover a reversion to type in modern Greece. Sometimes in the fields near Delphi one comes across a female with the profile of Athene—only a chlamys and fillet are lacking to complete the reincarnation. The males are rarer still. Mitsou here, my major-domo,—you will agree he has the true cast of classical features—I found in a restaurant at Thebes. Nicco, my valet, was in a fishmonger's shop at Patras. The rest are bastard Levantines of Albanian stock."

It was not long before Cyprian found his pet subject. The night waned while Caldecott was a drowsy listener to the intricacies of Greek politics. He was fascinated by Cyprian,—Cyprian who never slept in the dark but searched drunkenly for Hellas in the moonlit woods. In an aroma of ouzo Cyprian ranted rhetorically to his guest, his long artistic fingers incessantly caressing a string of amber conversation-beads. The meandering discourse was several times interrupted by the speaker's paroxysms of coughing, and Caldecott realised then that his host was pathetically attempting to evade the twilight of his life. He was really a shy, tubercular young man posing as an eccentric. He reminded Caldecott of a too highly-bred filly.

Close upon dawn Cyprian dragged him unsteadily to the bathing beach, after instructing Mitsou to bring the gramophone. Sirius, green as grass, was waning in the lightening sky. At the cliff's edge Cyprian made Caldecott a garland of wild cyclamen. Mitsou turned on the music and, enervated by the sound, a group of seals came tamely forward at

Cyprian's bidding. On the petrified hulk of a Persian galley they disported themselves as the daylight grew. In the warm water Caldecott, his drowsiness gone, was thinking: "this man is courting insanity and I envy him. He has a mental paradise in his dreams, a tangible Eden in his demesne. The island is superb. I lust for it beyond anything I have ever desired,"—and he looked up to see Cyprian coughing wildly supported by the Apollonic-featured Mitsou.

*

*

*

EIGHTEEN months later Caldecott became the owner of the island. He had given careful instructions to a solicitor in Athens to acquire the property as soon as possible after Cyprian's death. Back in India, his thoughts had often centred on Cyprian and the inevitable progress of his malady. His sense of *schadenfreude* was acute when the solicitor's cable from Athens arrived. Poor star-crossed Cyprian of the sagging frame and the incoherent mutterings! He could feel no pity for him. His charm had not impressed him. His taste in furnishing was poor, as a gardener he lacked knowledge and precision—inexcusable defects to the expert.

Within six months Caldecott resigned from his government post and set sail for Athens. His mind was occupied with a score of details concerning the island. In the Red Sea he lay awake in his hot berth turning over pleasurable plans for the future. He would instal an electric generator on his property, exterminate the rats which during

Cyprian's nocturnal orations had gambolled with insouciance in the living-rooms—a local Pied Piper was required. He would buy a good piano and Chinese carpets, and give select house-parties for the more intelligent members of the European community in Athens, for Caldecott had not yet brought himself to regard the Greeks as a white race. The Piræus was, in his view, a seedier Port Said, the typical Levantine—a glorified bead-vendor.

He stayed a week in Athens completing his arrangements. He acquired two French-speaking servants and an Alsatian dog. When he reached the island the weather was almost tempestuous. The solicitor, who had preceded him, met him with the motor-launch. Standing beside him was Mitsou, desiring employment. Caldecott surveyed the youth impartially. He was interested in his capacity for work rather than in his Grecian profile. Unlike Cyprian, he was oblivious of that aspect of the old music of Hellas. The youth seemed respectful and tolerably clean. Caldecott agreed to take him into his service as a gardener.

There was lightning and heavy thunder that first night on the island. The cypresses bent pliantly before the gale; the twisted contours of the wild olives split the darkness everywhere. But Caldecott was undismayed by the elements. With Philhellenic ecstasy he watched the storm. It gave him an immense satisfaction to realise that Pericles and Hadrian had once looked upon these same woods, that the hosts of Darius and Alaric and his

Goths had been their visitants. Encompassed by a vision of the past Caldecott sank pleasantly to sleep in his wind-ravaged demesne.

By the following morning the storm had abated. The sun-shot atmosphere was wonderfully transparent. The mountains across the strait were fixed in sepia against the horizon with the clarity of architectural lines. Caldecott, rising with buoyant eagerness, decided to break in the Alsatian to his surroundings. He found the dog in tune with the morning, sprightly and eager as himself. Through the wild cyclamen they threaded their way towards the pine woods to the east of the island, where the cliffs dropped steeply to the pellucid blue of the water. Near the summit the trees became denser and Caldecott had to brush the resinous branches from his face. It was then that the dog became restless, dragging its master across the scented brushwood towards the object of its excitement. In a clearing between the pines Caldecott was surprised to see Mitsou. The youth stood in alarm at the dog's barking, a lock of unruly hair across his brow. He might have been a shepherd lad in ancient Attica. Before him was a tombstone garlanded with wild flowers. Caldecott gazed with astonishment at the stone. When he saw the word ΚΥΠΡΙΑΝ written on it, his amazement gave place to anger. It had never occurred to him that Cyprian had been buried on the island. He imagined vaguely that an Athenian cemetery had been the unfortunate man's ultimate destination—the solicitor had not led him to think otherwise.

He felt disturbed and uneasy. The balm had gone out of the morning sunlight. His anger compelled him to order the silent Mitsou to return immediately to the house. Straining heavily at the leash, the Alsatian growled savagely as the lad, furtive and sulky of eye, disappeared amongst the pines.

*

*

*

LATE next evening Caldecott found himself lying idly in a rattan chair on the verandah. The solicitor, a tiresomely forensic Levantine, had returned to Athens during the afternoon. Peace dwelt again upon the island: the night was clear with moonlight. A chain of flocculent white clouds drifted slowly across the horizon with orderly progress. Caldecott clearly sensed the beauty of the scene and was responsive to its mingled melancholy. It reminded him of his boyhood in Ireland, and of the first occasion he had heard the *Londonderry Air*, when his body had grown unrestful at the lovely sadness of the tune. For a long time he gazed upon the moonlit sea. The subdued murmur of the waves breaking in the cove below soothed him into a pleasant drowsiness. Suddenly the Alsatian at his side began to bark truculently, its sensitive ears taut and expectant for sound, its keen eyes glistening. It ran excitedly to the end of the verandah. Caldecott followed. He could see a figure moving beyond the battlements where the cypresses were framed austere in the night. He clasped a handtorch and decided to investigate, allowing the dog to lead him forward. Soon he

saw the figure disappearing into the ground. With hurried steps he went through the formal garden, the scent of rosemary strong in his nostrils. When he reached the gateway it was difficult to restrain the animal, which, picking up the intruder's scent strongly, dragged him to a spot near the island chapel on the cliff. With surprise Caldecott beheld at his feet a cavity, into which the Alsatian was barking frenziedly. In the torch's glare a series of steps cut amateurishly into the wall of earth became visible. Caldecott lowered himself cautiously into the hollow. A bat flew wildly past him, brushing his shoulder. Almost immediately he was aware of the strong fumes of *retsinata*, and he knew that this place was Cyprian's wine-storage. He heard faintly a movement behind him in the corner of the cellar. Turning quickly he directed the torch into the damp-smelling darkness——

He saw then the faces of Mitsou and the boatman illumined, yellow and apprehensive, in the circle of light. In their hands they held flagons of *retsinata*. For some minutes he surveyed the men fixedly, his anger rising. He hated them for they were a part of Cyprian's world, as was this secret cellar. Since his discovery of Cyprian's grave the previous morning, he had felt a growing uneasiness. He intended to have Cyprian's body exhumed and reburied on the mainland as soon as possible. Nothing of Cyprian's influence should remain. His glance roamed amongst the jars of *retsinata* which formed a background to the two servants and the floodgates of his anger broke. Like a

madman he ran forward and swept the rows of clay flagons to the feet of the cowering men. The breaking pottery resounded harshly about them. A torrent of incoherent abuse flowed from Caldecott's lips as the yellow liquid trickled over the flooring.

"You're his damned menials!" he shouted uncontrollably at them. "I'll be master here."

At that moment he fancied he saw a gleam of scorn in Mitsou's eyes and he lunged forward and struck the youth fiercely across the mouth. The torch fell from his hand. In the darkness he heard the men scrambling out of the cellar. Their terror amused him—frightened mice they were—the Alsatian would give them their due. His satisfaction at the idea was succeeded by a tremor of weakness. His brain faltered. Then he clutched his heart weakly and sank gasping to the fluid-soiled flagstones.

*

*

*

IN the morning his French-speaking butler informed him that Mitsou and the boatman had gone. He was glad, for he reckoned that the memory of Cyprian would be lessened by their defection. After his collapse in the cellar he had slept badly. Ill at ease and dissatisfied with life, he passed the morning listlessly. He wrote to Athens for a radio-de-luxe and a selection of flower seeds. In the afternoon he made his way with the Alsatian to the seal cove. It was idyllic there. For hours he swam in the benevolent warmth, diving for cornelians in the clear, blue inlets. Re-

laxed in the sunshine on the beach, he felt his strength returning.

A succession of ideas raced through his mind. The island, he decided, had been wasted on Cyprian. The best grapes could be grown in profusion and the rich soil would yield itself favourably to a variety of vegetables. He would protect the conifers from the depredations of roving fisher-folk, make a personal survey of the place—he had already noticed a tumulus with archæological possibilities.

He left the cove and climbed to the saddle of the island. Through masses of wild crocuses the Alsatian padded at his side. From the summit, in a gap between the conifers, there was a clear view of the house and its ramparts. A mile away, it shimmered quiescently in the haze. Caldecott felt all the quick pride of ownership. He continued to make plans. In six months time he would have his own dairy. He would replace Mitsou and the boatman by skilled workers——

His daydreams were interrupted by the sound of coughing. Spasms, hollow and deathly, echoed in the stillness. The Alsatian commenced to whimper nearby. Caldecott went towards the animal. He found it quivering abjectly, its back arched from fear. Five yards away, through a tunnel in the greenery, he could see Cyprian's tomb.

*

*

*

Soon afterwards the French-speaking servants complained that their sleep was frequently disturbed by the sound of coughing. There was someone on the island, they said. The Alsatian

continued to be subdued in fear. Caldecott grew desperate. He roamed around the house at night, seeking for any intruder. The moonlight found him searching the olive grove for the owner of the cough. He tried to comfort himself by assigning the sound to some elusive fisher-lad thieving firewood from the island. And when none appeared he began in vain to suspect the little island owls which floated lightly between the moonlit cypresses, crying discordantly on the still air.

He tried to overcome his depression by reading humorous novels at night but his attention invariably strayed from the printed page. The drolleries of Leacock and Wodehouse were no antidote to the apprehensive thoughts which pierced his brain vividly at fixed intervals, as a lighthouse stabs the dark.

The climax came after three days and nights of torrential rain. Caldecott had not reckoned on such a metamorphosis. The island was bedraggled and mist-wreathed, and the roof of the house leaked badly. The atmosphere was coldly pallid and grim. The servants wore heavy Albanian sheepskin cloaks; their sullen, unhappy countenances betrayed a growing discontentment with their isolation at the island. The Alsatian lay moribund in a corner of the living-room, shivering uneasily to life when any particularly strong gust of wind whistled round the walls of the dwelling.

On the third night Caldecott lay insomniacally in the darkness. He had abandoned his attempts to read a detective novel. He wished suddenly

that he was back in India again, at the town in the hot plains where he had been the *burra saheb* of the large cantonment, a guard of sepoy's heralding his entry to the court. Why had he given up that life of garlanded respect and security? He told himself ruefully that the impulse which had assailed him that first night he spent on the island as Cyprian's guest had been an ill-balanced one. His senses had been heavily drugged by the beauty of the scene. He knew himself to be an incurable romantic. The caves at Ajanta had always attracted him in moth-like fashion. At times he had the faculty of living in the past with uncanny lucidity. In this case a nostalgia for other epochs had been intensified by the loveliness of the Grecian landscape. By contrast, the drab plains of India, ochrous in the heat, had heightened his pleasant memories of the island.

Wind-disturbed and full of fears, he once more began to think of Cyprian. He was quite unable to banish his predecessor's image from his mind. Beneath his weak, indecisive exterior the youth must have possessed some marked characteristic, otherwise he would not have looked so vividly in retrospect. Caldecott helped himself to a glass of brandy and, heartened by the stimulant, felt himself less affected by the memory of the tubercular poseur. He decided to see that the exhumation took place the next day. The fellow's bones should be laid reverently to rest under some sad cypress on the mainland.

It was then that he smelt it—the overpowering

aroma of ouzo, sinister and repellant. It suddenly filled the room with its sickly, penetrative fumes, to vanish completely a second later. Caldecott's blood froze ; he remembered the occasion on which he had experienced the smell before—that first night on the island when Cyprian had drunkenly discoursed on Venizelist politics until the dawn arrived. The odour had then emanated from Cyprian's person ; his clothes had been saturated with the spilt liquor.

Had he returned in death ?

Fearfully, Caldecott let his eyes roam towards the shadowy parts of the room. He was convinced that he could smell Cyprian. Had he not heard him coughing amongst the conifers ? He strained his nostrils for the elusive odour. For a few moments he thought it had disappeared, then he imagined that it was returning in intensified degree, that Cyprian was moving close to him in the darkness by his bedside. A goat bell stood on the table nearby. He grasped it with clammy hands and rang hysterically for the servants. They came in drowsily some moments later.

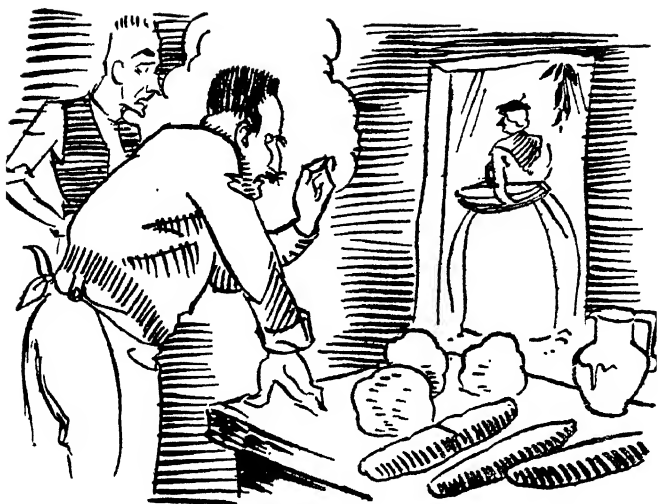
"Am I sober ?" he shouted at them. "Do you smell him ?"

They gazed back blankly at him. The master was having a nightmare. Very soon Caldecott became practical. He demanded a pen and paper. The servants brought them to him with a puzzled swiftness. Intently they stared at him, as he spread out the writing block on the bedpane, his eyes sparkling with feverish eagerness. He spoke

slowly as he wrote.

"For Immediate Sale," he dictated to himself the words falling pleasantly from his lips, 'a Most Desirable Island off the Grecian Coast. Self-Contained, with Modern Villa, gardens, vineyards——' Immobile, the servants watched their master's actions. It seemed to them that his countenance had now assumed an aspect of subdued contentment.





XXVI. THE BAKER'S WIFE

To the casual tourist the family at the *Bonne Bouche* restaurant appeared to be a model of domestic felicity. Monsieur Aristide, the *patron* was a tall, shambling, middle-aged Nicois who smiled benignly at the customers whenever he had the opportunity to leave the bake-house and survey the twelve ill-spaced dining tables, gay with bases of oleander and mimosa. His wife Camille worked hard and kept the place as clean as her own flashing white teeth. She was so abnormally obese that her agility and customary sangfroid invariably aroused one's admiration and wonderment. Her features were well-formed and pleasing in a Semitic

manner and she possessed durable assets in her sparkling eyes, her clear pink complexion and her glossy hair. Her daughter Perlette, aged nineteen and assistant waitress to her mother, inherited these qualities. She was the reigning toast of the many *chasseurs Alpins* who in the late afternoons frequented the restaurant for their *pernod fils*. Slim and attractive, a red rose in her dark hair, Perlette was adept in exchanging *plaisanteries* with those husky-voiced soldiers who feasted their jovial, predatory eyes on her soft youth. She was a good girl—Aristide knew—and she was invaluable in drawing customers to the house. Her brother Lucien was a young edition of his father. Tall, bronzed and handsome, he had no ambitions; his life was bounded by the four walls of the bake-house, his only recreation being an occasional nocturnal adventure on the benches in the municipal gardens.

A jolly family, the casual tourist would decide, as he consumed the excellent Provencal melon served delicately to him by the *Patronne* or by her entrancing daughter whose eyes were as blue as the sky above the Esterel. If the door was ajar, the tourist could sometimes see the bake-house oven showing row upon row of crisp browned loaves that the baker's son was shovelling out with his long-handled *palette*. A family without discord, immersed in the toil which brought them a reasonable livelihood—that was my considered verdict until I found a certain loquacious elderly gentleman seated beside me one night. I had

already made his acquaintance in the *salles des jeux* at the jetty casino, where he gambled spasmodically with an expression of intense boredom. I watched him now carefully wiping the *bouillabaisse* from his dyed moustache. He was a *gourmand* and, preoccupied with his food, he merely nodded at me blandly between mouthfuls.

Then he began to speak.

"A happy family, m'seu," he announced, impatiently awaiting the *entree*.

I agreed with conviction while he sipped his Beaujolais appreciatively.

"Some years ago there was great strife in this *maison*, m'seu. It is a strange story. You may permit me to recount the circumstances when I have finished my food," he said, greedily eyeing the dish which Perlette had placed before him.

"By all means," I answered encouragingly.

In the background I could see the *Patronne* conducting a trio of American ladies to their table, a crescent smile of satisfaction on her countenance, her gait a rhythmical waddle. I could in no ways associate the phrase 'great strife' with the pleasant domestic atmosphere of the 'Bonne Bouche.'

*

*

*

MADAME la Patronne (I learnt from the elderly gentleman) was in the habit of taking a promenade between the hours of three and five in the afternoon. It was her custom then to buy a bag of fondants and to stroll leisurely down the main boulevards of the city. She seldom made any purchases on these occasions (though, if she felt

especially weary, she sometimes treated herself to a plate of *escargots* at a friend's stall) but she derived considerable pleasure from imagining herself the potential owner of the fashionable Parisian garments, hats and shoes displayed in the scintillating windows of the larger emporiums. For years she had automatically indulged in this afternoon walk. She was a familiar sight to many of the shopkeepers, who came to regard her as an ambulant timepiece.

"Madame Camille has already come and gone," they would say, implying that the hour for closing was not far off.

Now it happened some years ago that Monsieur Aristide noticed a coolness—or at least a pre-occupation—in his wife's attitude to him, a state of things which rapidly developed into an ill-concealed estrangement. They had always been happy in their marital relations and he at first attributed the whole affair to the onslaught of *anno domini* where his wife was concerned. All passion spent, he ruminated, was a sad climax but an unavoidable one. Camille, however, was becoming unbearably hostile, indeed she was almost feline in her outbursts of temper—he was at a loss to understand the feminine temperament. Outsiders had already noticed the metamorphosis. One day he even heard a diner remarking to another "*Sa femme porte les culottes*" and he had retreated shamefacedly to the sanctuary of the bake-house. Then an astounding suspicion came upon him; he wondered if Camille had taken a

lover—it seemed, on the face of things, absurd, yet—pfui! one never knew the workings of a woman's mind. She might be associating clandestinely with one of the young gigolos from the jetty casino, those hermaphroditic creatures who would go to any extreme to satisfy their mercenary instincts. Or had she come under the sway of one of those plausible croupiers who were free in the afternoons. He began to visualise Camille in the arms of such an oleaginous scoundrel and involuntarily he beat his chest in anger; it would afford him supreme pleasure to exert his manliness against Camille's lover. The prospect of a duel at dawn loomed up excitingly in his chaotic thoughts, while jealousy gnawed away rat-like at the back of his brain. Soon his work commenced to deteriorate under the strain. Customers began to complain of the ill-baked bread—Monsieur Aristide had never experienced such misery before. Life had become a great predicament. In desperation one afternoon he felt constrained to confide in Lucien and Perlette. Camille had departed—brazenly, he termed it—for her customary promenade and the little restaurant was quite still save for the penetrating monotone of the blue-bottles on the window panes.

“Your mother has taken a lover,” he told them with dramatic bluntness. He saw Perlette glance up wide-eyed from the film magazine which engrossed her. Lucien, who was eating a banana, stared at him equally incredulously.

“C'est impossible,” they cried simultaneously,

and it was not long before they broke into peals of loud, unrestrained laughter.

"*C'est vrai*," he shouted irritably. But the idea of Camille having taken a paramour was too ludicrous for their imaginations. They continued to laugh boisterously. Maman was too blowsy, too domesticated to arouse the carnal instincts in any man. Besides she was, like the ageing furniture, indispensably part of the restaurant—it was as if Papa suspected one of the oldest chairs of having found a soul-mate!

With an oath Aristide, incensed by their glee, flung on his hat and hastened into the street.

* * *

DAZEDLY he found himself walking in the direction of the main boulevard. It was a hot afternoon and he perspired freely. The sirocco fanned his unhappy meditations into a dull resentful flame; he could visualise little, for the image of Camille's illicit indulgences crowded everything else from his mind. He looked blankly at the shop windows as he passed. Once he happened to see his reflection in a mirror and he stood still summing up his appearance appraisingly. He considered himself a fine figure of a man; the zest of youth was still evident in his limbs; his eyes were capable of expressing the manly vigour which was yet strong within him, and he regretted ruefully that he had never resorted to a mistress. For a man to seek a lover was not a culpable action in his estimation, but for a hitherto respectable married woman to do so was a dastardly, infamous deed.

Almost petulantly he wiped the beads of sweat from his sunburnt neck and strode on towards the fashionable arcades.

Within a few seconds he saw Camille——furtively he withdrew himself behind the cover of a kiosk. She was fifteen yards away, gazing with deep attention into a chromium-plated shop window. It seemed to him to be an establishment where men's clothing of the more expensive type was exhibited. Unwittingly he bit his lips and concluded that his wife's lover was serving within the premises. Carefully sheltered by the kiosk, he watched Camille staring with apparent rapture at the window. For five minutes she stood there, an expression of adoration on her features, then at last he saw her obese, ridiculous figure waddling away awkwardly along the boulevard. When she had disappeared from sight he left his shelter and approached the object of her attraction. The chromium-plated facade contained little but an array of highly-priced shirts and ties. Against a curtained background a tailor's dummy displayed a silken, extravagant bathrobe. Monsieur Aristide wondered if his wife's lover had been visible through a chink in the crimson curtains, thus compelling the attitude of mute adoration which he had observed upon her countenance. His curiosity knew no limits. He decided to enter the shop on the pretext of inquiring the price of a tie. At last he would meet face to face that home-wrecker, the thief of Camille's affections.

He straightened himself to his full stature and

pushed open the chromium door with a sense of keen bravado.

There were two people behind the counter—a decrepit, elderly man with an extremely yellow bald head, and a gaunt female dressed in widow's weeds. This *veuve* came towards him obsequiously while he stared fixedly at the old man. Ptah! it did not seem possible that this acidulous septuagenarian could be Camille's partner in infamy. He requested the widow to show him some ties. He found it difficult to concentrate on the samples as his gaze was mesmerised by the repellent, wizened features of the old man. Camille, he reflected, must have lost her senses—The shortsighted old man behind the counter was undoubtedly beyond the capacity for illicit love. Disapproving, he rejected the cheapest of the ties and, a little reassured, left the shop.

*

*

*

THE unpleasantness at the *Bonnie Bouche* restaurant—said the elderly gentleman—became acute. Punctually each afternoon Madame Camille left for her promenade, her bag of fondants securely gripped in her podgy fist. For a week her husband followed her daily and traced her peregrinations, his eyes ablaze with jealousy. Her objective continued to be the outfitter's shop on the main boulevard. Each day she gazed with trance-like adoration into the same chromium-plated window until Aristide became convinced that the bald-headed septuagenarian was, in spite of his decrepitude, her secret passion.

Then one day he made a startling discovery. The takings in the restaurant still showed a heavy discrepancy. Lucien and Perlette he considered to be innocent and he boldly taxed Camille with the robbery. To his astonishment she admitted that she had taken the money. They had a stormy scene until Lucien and Perlette intervened. Aristide had never stinted his wife in money matters ; she worked hard and he did not grudge her a proper reward. He was, however, amazed that she should be giving money to the old man in the outfitter's— if she had been wasting it on a showy gigolo he could have understood her action, but the septuagenarian was obviously a man of means.

A duel, he swore, was the only remedy for the existing state of affairs. He left the bake-house one morning and set out in challenging manner for the outfitter's. Before entering the premises he glanced into the window to see if there was any sign of his wife's lover beyond the red-curtained background. But there was no chink visible in the draperies. Alone, the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired tailor's dummy, almost human in his luxurious bath-robe, leered back stonily at him from the rear of the window. That cherubic countenance seemed to be aware of his dilemma——Monsieur Aristide could no longer keep his emotions under control. He burst into the shop angrily. The *veuve* was standing dejectedly behind the counter sorting out a selection of ties. The old gentleman was not to be seen anywhere. "*Parbleu !*" thought Aristide, "the old cockroach has fled."

"*Le lache ! On est-il ?*" he thundered raucously at the woman in black before him.

"I do not understand, m'seu."

"*Le viellard*——"

"My brother died last week. You have a debt, m'seu ?"

Monsieur Aristide was tongue-tied as he looked into the bewildered melancholy eyes of the widow. Hastily he donned his hat and ran from the shop.

Some days later a strange event occurred. A large oblong package was delivered at the restaurant for Madame Camille. The parcel was too large and too heavy to contain wearing apparel. Completely baffled, Monsieur Aristide and his children watched Camille giving orders to the two labourers who were carrying the burden upstairs. The package was labelled 'fragile' and to judge from the zealously with which Camille superintended its transit, it might have contained gold and precious stones. In the bedroom she saw that it was safely locked away in the wardrobe. The bedroom was her sanctuary. Neither Aristide nor the children were permitted to cross the threshold. With feline ferocity Madame Camille guarded the doorway which she had lately secured with a weighty padlock.

The mysterious package aroused Aristide's curiosity. Was it a legacy from his wife's dead lover ? For he was quite certain now that the old man in the outfitter's had been the object of his wife's aberration. Since his demise Camille had actually given up her afternoon promenades,

though the domestic situation had as yet shown no signs of improvement. Camille was still irritable and antagonistic in her attitude to him. In the afternoons she withdrew herself enigmatically to her bedroom and he felt somehow that the large package was instrumental in keeping her there behind the locked door. Gradually he began to find the secret upstairs more aggravating than the sight of Camille's lover had ever been. The package was a tantalising problem which was never far absent from his unhappy thoughts in the bakehouse.

*

*

*

ONE Sunday afternoon Perlette was scanning the photographs of her favourite *vedettes* in a film magazine. She was alone in the restaurant. Her mother had gone to tea with the parish priest and Lucien was with a companion on the *plage*. Her father had left the restaurant moodily when his baking was concluded. She found the opportunity a good one to arrange her hair according to the latest film fashions. Before the big mirror she cajoled her dark locks into an Edwardian style, pouting a little at the unlooked-for effect. She doubted if the *chasseurs Alpins* would appreciate such a revolutionary method of hairdressing. Her tresses were still disarranged in the throes of the new mode when a commotion in the doorway made her turn round hastily——

She shrieked in alarm, for her father was standing there, swaying drunkenly to and fro, an axe in his grip.

"He's going to murder *maman*," she thought,

as she ran towards him hysterically.

"She's not unfaithful, papa," she cried, placing a restraining arm on his unsteady figure.

"I'm not looking—hic—for your mother," he returned coldly, "I'm going to find the—hic—package upstairs." And he commenced to climb the steps.

Perlette followed him apprehensively. She was relieved that papa was not intent on harming Camille. She was even a little excited at the prospect of seeing the door of her mother's bedroom shattered and the contents of the mysterious package revealed. She had sometimes wondered if her mother had invested in a coffin, as the peasants in the Jura so often did.

She watched her father raising the axe savagely against the panels of the doorway, which soon gave away under his heavy blows. The excitement of the affair gripped her; it was, she fancied, a little like breaking in upon one of those tombs of the Egyptian Kings. Her heart beat frenziedly and she could not help feeling deeply thrilled. At last the door was demolished and they entered Camille's bedroom. A reek of stale scent smote their nostrils. Within a few moments her father prized open the doors of the large wardrobe——

The sight which met their gaze caused them to remain dumbfounded for some moments. Then her father commenced to laugh uproariously.

Staring at them fixedly stood the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired tailor's dummy, his pink waxen cheeks dominating the shadow of the wardrobe.

Perlette found herself admitting that the dummy was a handsome youth: the life-like blue eyes aroused her sympathy. She saw her father sinking back on the bed, paralysed with mirth. That his wife's 'lover' should be this waxen boy seemed to him the funniest thing in the world. Then another impulse overcame him. He would make assurance doubly sure. Jumping up he ran to the wardrobe and seized the dummy aggressively. With a drunken chuckle he placed Camille's 'lover' across his broad shoulders and made for the stairs. Perlette followed. The blue eyes of the dummy appeared to rest upon her, imploring her help——

To the bake-house they went. The sadistic glare of conquest in her father's eyes was a revelation to Perlette. She had never imagined that her parent—the shambling, lethargic Nicois—could rouse himself to such a pitch of venomous delight. For years, hunting cockroaches in the bake-house had been his most martial achievement.

His curses now were ferocious and picturesque. She was proud of his anger. Spellbound, she watched him hurl the troublesome dummy into the flames of the bake-house oven. The immolation was dramatically awe-inspiring. The dummy's cherubic cheeks rapidly melted into amorphously ridiculous shapes; the waxen throat subsided in great goitrous folds, the appealing eyes sank into a welter of deformity.

"Hah!" shouted Aristide, with a malevolent grin, and he wiped his hands triumphantly. He knew he had removed for ever the source of the

trouble which had so gravely menaced the domestic atmosphere.

*

*

*

THE elderly gentleman flicked his cigar ash into his empty coffee cup.

"And so, m'seu, the great strife ended."

I looked up to see Madame Camille bowing felicitously to a group of new customers. Behind her stood Perlette, her dark hair shining like blue satin in the candlelight, her slim loveliness a magnet to all eyes. In the back doorway I caught a glimpse of Lucien and his father busily engaged in the cleansing of plates and cutlery. They seemed completely satisfied with life.

"A happy family, m'seu," said the elderly gentleman, following the direction of my glance.



XXVII. GHOSTS IN MAY

PARIS in spring! Maître Julien betrayed his exhilaration at the season by donning an ancient Panama hat and a faded alpaca coat. I happened to make his acquaintance over *dejeuner* in a small restaurant off the Rue de Batignolles. I had noticed him there, seated austere in the plush corner seat, sipping his Bordeaux slowly and at regular intervals using his napkin deftly on his facial adornment, a goatee beard and adroitly waxed moustache. He was elderly, sallow-complexioned, and wore gold pince-nez. There was something vaguely forensic in his appearance,—his sad brown eyes reflected his experience of life—and I was not surprised to hear that he was a retired advocate, a widower, living in lodgings nearby. He began our acquaintance by recommending to my ignorant Saxon palate the maison's excellent *ecrevisse*. Within a week we found each other mealtime companions, seated side by side in the faded plush corner seat. We exchanged confidences. I discovered that Maître Julien was a *gourmet* with a philosophy ripened by worthy vintages and a metaphysical mind.

"A Frenchman with a full pocket," he once told me, "will always think first of his stomach, and secondly of love."

One midday, after our first week's friendship,

my companion, lighting a strong cigar, suggested a postprandial stroll to the public gardens at the end of the boulevard. We set out in the delightful spring sunshine, conversing animatedly on the merits of *Madame Bovary* as we stepped leisurely under the fresh-leafed plane trees. The public gardens proved to be a pleasant backwater sparsely frequented by the populace. A couple of nursemaids with their charges, and a derelict or two, alone occupied the benches. There were graceful poplars above us and tall chestnut trees thronged with murmurous pigeons. A sense of overflowing sap was in the atmosphere.

"A delightful rendez-vous, m'seu," remarked Maître Julien as we seated ourselves on a bench facing a lawn gay with clusters of laughing tulips.

"I consider myself the garden's oldest denizen," he continued drily. "I have been familiar with it for fifty years. Three generations of *bonnes* have passed before my gaze. Beggars have come and gone and in my time and park-keepers have waxed and waned. For many years I have regarded this small enclosure as my private realm. Only illness—I suffer from *la bronchite* in the winter, mi'eu—has interrupted my daily visit. The birds, you will observe, are my especial friends."

From his pocket, my companion drew forth a packet of crumbs, and his feathered acquaintances, to say nothing of a number of tawny squirrels, soon appeared from all sides to partake of his bounty. The feast concluded, Maître Julien lit another cigar and surveyed the springtide scene with a

supremely placid mien. I should have enjoyed the scent of the adjacent waterfall of syringa to greater advantage if the rank odour of the old man's cigar had not filled my nostrils with such overpowering insistence. As if reading my thoughts, the advocate said quietly——

"You appreciate perfumes, M'seu?"

"If they are not too exotic," I replied.

"In England, m'seu, do they not consider perfumes a female prerogative? The Londoner, I have been told, calls us dagoes if we scent our persons."

Maitre Julien laughed, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. After a moment's deep silence he jerked forth abruptly——

"What is your opinion of the perfume of Gardenia, m'seu?"

"It is distinctive but a minimum suffices," I answered.

"It is a lover's perfume, m'seu," cried my companion with nostalgic rapture. Then his face assumed a great sadness and his eyes grew dark with trouble.

"It was my wife's favourite perfume m'seu."

"You have been a widower for long, Maitre Julien?" I enquired delicately, seeing that the old man's countenance was filled with emotion.

"For fifty years, m'seu. My wife Mathilde died eight months after our marriage. She was twenty. I was twenty-one. The day before her death we sat together on this very spot. It was a blue spring day like this——birds and squirrels rampant on the

lawns, verdure everywhere. We were tremendously happy."

"You have had a lonely life m'seu " I muttered in condolence.

My companion turned towards me vehemently.

"There you are wrong m'seu. I have been anything but lonely. My wife Mathilde visits me here almost daily. Her presence is never far away in this sanctuary of mine."

I looked into the old man's sad eyes, my expression exhibiting my thoughts.

"And now, m'seu you think I am a madman," he said calmly. "Do not trouble to deny it—it is the natural conjecture. But then, m'seu, you do not believe in the life beyond. You will be surprised when I tell you that I am frequently as certain of my wife Mathilde's presence here as I am of your proximity now. It is not a visible presence, m'seu, but it has one strange aspect—almost tangible evidence you might say—an aspect which has never ceased to fill me with enchantment. My wife, m'seu, gives me warning of her presence——

A faint waft of gardenia perfume, a mere soupçon, m'seu, and I realise that she is close to me. I see you are incredulous. You will say there are a thousand perfumes in this acre—wistaria, syringa, heliotrope, the hyacinth, but in winter, when the clouds hang as a black curtain over the city and the mist comes up menacingly from the Seine, then there can be no scent of any kind in my realm, and I can assure you, m'seu, that the aroma of gardenia

is as forceful in the dark December noons as in this paradisaal atmosphere. It is, you will say, an old man's especial whim, but it is a very comforting madness, you will agree, m'seu."

Maître Julien relit his cigar with a steady hand. Five minutes later we parted, the old man going home contentedly for his afternoon siesta. Towards the main gate on the boulevard, through branches heavy with almond blossom, I watched his Panama hat and faded alpaca coat disappear from sight.

*

*

*

IN 1937 I revisted Paris for the Exhibition and on the second day of my stay I made my way to the little restaurant off the Rue de Batignolles. The premises had changed little. In the window stood the same figure of Charlie Chaplin evolved from crab and lobster legs; the plush cushions were as comfortable and as dusty as they had been three years before. And the same proprietor, with a noticeably wider paunch, beamed officiously from behind the till.

But there was no sign of Maître Julien. Perhaps I was too early. No doubt the old man was ambling up the boulevard, imbibing the intoxicating scents of the season, prior to taking his well-loved midday meal. I sat down in the corner seat and ordered an *aperitif*. Half an hour passed and the advocate did not appear.

On a sudden impulse I approached the proprietor.

"At what hour does Maître Julien take *dejeuner*?"

“Maitre Julien, m’seu !——”

I then learnt that the old man had died the previous winter. ‘*La congestion pulmonaire. Tres triste.*’ The proprietor had lost a very good customer—his expressive hands denoted a genuine regret. I finished a dish of *ecrevisse* and left the restaurant. The boulevard was filled again with sunlight and the exuberance of early summer was abroad. I wandered down the street until I found myself before the entrance to Maitre Julien’s ‘private sanctuary’—the secluded public garden where the pigeons and the squirrels were his ‘especial friends.’ I entered and proceeded to the bench where we had had our last conversation three years before. The garden was still empty save for a *bonne* with a sleeping baby, and a derelict who occupied himself in collecting cigarette butts. The syringa was in bloom and the pigeons were still murmurous in the tall chestnut trees.

A strange sense of loneliness overcame me as I sat there thinking of the old man who for fifty years had been a faithful visitant of that pleasant backwater. To be contented with a cigar and an illusive memory—that was surely supreme happiness. I was meditating thus when an extraordinary thing occurred——

A faint perfume of gardenia smote my nostrils. I glanced round to see if the shrub, with its waxen, exotic blooms, was concealed anywhere near, but none showed itself.

The odour passed, and I remembered the old man’s story of his wife Mathilde. Then I suddenly

became aware of another smell—I recognised it immediately.

It was the foul reek of one of the unpleasantly strong cigars which Maître Julien had so complacently enjoyed.





XXVIII. THE NIGHTINGALES ARE DUMB

I FIRST met Sigrid on the boat going to Copenhagen. She was bronzed and Nordically nice and I, being fresh from College, was impressionable. On the train ferry from Fyn we ate *smorrebrod* together, while our conversation ranged from the merits of Sibelius to the potentialities of *schnaps*. It was beautiful there, with the reflection of the moon ribboned across the cobalt calm of the water.

Sigrid had a soft voice, blue eyes, and hair as flaxen as the colour of the windmills we had passed in the train. For six months she had been living with a family at Manchester in order to learn the language fluently. She was not enamoured of England. The London streets were so 'very dirty with petrol fumes,' and the waitresses in the restaurants changed their aprons too infrequently according to her notions. Nobody, she thought, was really happy in Manchester, but in Copenhagen it was all 'deefereent'. In that city there were cafés and music-filled taverns where one could laugh unrestrainedly without incurring glances of reproof from the patrons. And the English would not even laugh at a dog-fight!

Sigrid was my guide the first night I spent in Copenhagen, and I learnt the family history as we sat and watched the fireworks in the Tivoli Gardens. (Her father, who was a Swede, owned a castle near

Malmo; her mother was Danish). The rockets spluttered shrilly above us and the catherine wheels burnt themselves frenziedly to extinction. The moon's disc seemed pleasantly artificial against a foreground of illuminated willows. In this fairy-land I sat enraptured listening to Sigrid's soft voice. I remember little things: how she warned me to be careful when crossing the streets, as there were nearly half a million cyclists in the city, and I remember that I bought her a copy of *The Forsyte Saga* from a bookstall.

At midnight she borrowed a friend's car and we drove out along the Strandrejen-Elsinore Road, passing little moonlit fishing villages girdled by clusters of light green beeches. Vistas of the sea loomed up continually between the tree stems and Sigrid would clasp my wrist to point out the long tongues of white foam breaking on the strand.

I felt very happy there.

*

*

*

A WEEK later Sigrid's Danish mother sent me an invitation to stay at the castle near Malmo. I caught the Stockholm 'plane and made the short journey over the Sound through a cloudless sky. Sigrid met me at the Malmo airfield. I liked the Swedes immediately. There were so many people in the streets with whom one felt it would be a pleasure to fraternise. To a certain extent I could understand Sigrid's antipathy to the English phlegm.

The road to the castle wound through idyllic parklands where the deer stood browsing in the

late spring sunlight. It was nearly six o'clock when we drove into the demesne and I beheld Sigrid's home, which was a pretentious pseudo-renaissance piece of architecture. Sigrid's father had made his money in Greenland furs; his taste in building was sadly philistine. He turned out to be a jovial little man clad in tweed plus fours. Except for his very flaxen hair, he would not have been out of place on the pier at any English coastal resort. Sigrid's mother descended the ornate staircase to greet us with charm, in the manner of a heroine making her entrance in a Pinero play. She was an attractive woman with kindly features, yet an aura of melancholy seemed to cling about her.

Someone was playing Schumann's *Traumerie* in a room adjacent to the hall. I told Sigrid that it was one of my favourites.

"My sister's playing," she said, dully. "She's only a schoolgirl and treats music as a joke." I sensed a faint touch of scorn in Sigrid's voice. She had never mentioned any sister when relating the family history to me in Copenhagen. At supper in the plush-curtained dining-hall Sigrid and her parents alone were present and I gathered that the young sister had her food with her governess.

After the meal we sat round a log fire. Sigrid's father lit a cigar and spoke expansively of Danish porcelain and the wonderful breweries in Copenhagen. Sigrid's mother knitted. I gazed at her, thinking her gently beautiful in a sad Arthurian

way, and I tried to visualise her loveliness as a young girl. There was something of the father in Sigrid, but the mother was an alien stock.

At ten o'clock I walked down the formal garden in the moonlight with Sigrid. The scent of stock rose powerfully from the borders. I was thrilled by the nightingales, which were singing with a robust clarity in the linden trees. Their song was incredibly fascinating and at times the fluid notes sounded a little thrush-like to my untutored ear.

"It's lovely," I told Sigrid.

"Do you think so?" she said. "We're plagued by nightingales here. They prevent us from sleeping."

*

*

*

I FOUND my room comfortable in a Victorian fashion. The sentimentalists of Scandinavia displayed their creations on the walls around my bed; a sailor's farewell was not lacking. There was a thick red carpet, and a bowl filled with wild scabious was conspicuous on the mantelpiece. As I undressed I listened to the rhapsodies in the lindens outside. I wondered if one could have a surfeit of such melody, if Keats had sometimes resorted to cotton wool, as Sigrid seemed to think. I switched off the light, opened the window wide, and lay on the bed, entranced by the tremulous waterfall of sound.

It was then that I heard the door open gently behind me. I looked round to see a tall girl with a boyish figure and a face which even in the dim moonlight revealed the beauty of Sigrid's mother

in her girlhood. She wore a blue silk night-dress.

"I'm Ingrid," a voice said simply. "I was not able to sleep because of the *nattergalen*. I like their singing but it makes me sad. You don't mind me to come?"

"Of course not," I said politely to the girl as she clasped the bedrail. She spoke softly and earnestly.

"My sister, Sigrid, hates the *nattergalen*. She's not musical. She's cruel. My *muder* says there's a Viking in her nature sometimes. I'm seventeen. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"You're handsome. I don't see the Englishmen so often—that's why my English speaking is not so good. I try to practise it on the English hikers so often as I can. Sometimes they laugh at me."

"I think you speak very well," I told Ingrid, whose face was as lovely as the nightingale's song.

"I put those wild flowers up there," she said, pointing to the scabious. "I thought you would like them. I think they are lovely and blue like the sky sometimes. Do you not think so? I found them in one of my father's meadows. It is too early to lie there yet, but it is nice there with the insects that make honey in the summer. Sigrid says it is common to lie in the meadows. What say you?"

"I think it's fine."

"What does that mean?"

"It means swell—nice and pleasant and delightful."

"I like the good smell of the Klover."

"You tastes are like mine."

"I must go back to bed now. *Min kaere guver-nande* Thodorson, she is—what do you call?—the swine. I should like to ride the horseback with you to-morrow, but Sigrid would be jealous and so angry. What is your name?"

"Shaun."

"That is nice. Good-night, Shaun."

The door closed softly and Ingrid was gone. I lay there, drowsily numb, thinking of the white oval of her face. For a little while the nightingales rested from their song.

*

*

*

I saw Ingrid only once the next day—at the tea-table. She was elusive and the parents did not appear to worry about her absence. Miss Thodorson, her governess, a gaunt elderly woman, came to tea with her. She made tart little jokes and Ingrid was subdued. The girl's loveliness was still more apparent by daylight. She was somehow ethereal. She reminded me curiously of something in the animal studies by Continental artists. It might have been her eyes, which were gentle and deer-like as the mother's. Her hair was even more glorious in colour than Sigrid's. She had *finesse* in contrast to Sigrid's sturdy handsomeness.

I had spent a long morning riding across the estate with Sigrid and her father, viewing the livestock and listening to explanations of acreage bearings and the propensities of fallow-land. I

was a little weary as a result of simulating an interest in things which mildly bored me and, like Ingrid, I was inclined to be silent at tea. As the father monopolised the conversation, nobody noticed our deficiency in spirits. He spoke authoritatively on the quality of furs from Reykiavik while I covertly admired Ingrid's eyelashes and tried to conceal my interest from Sigrid, who sat on my left, facing her sister. The smouldering hostility between the sisters was evident from the tone and limits of their conversation.

When Ingrid left with her governess the room seemed empty of interest, but Sigrid and her father kept silence at bay. Sigrid's father was relating how he had seen four monarchs together on the balcony of the palace at Copenhagen. Sigrid's mother I found easy to converse with, but her melancholy was unfathomable. I then noticed Sigrid looking at me keenly. She suggested a row on the lake. There were waders to be found in the wardrobe of my room.

I went upstairs to find a sweater. There was an envelope on my pillow addressed to 'Shaun.' I tore it open and read an exuberant scrawl :

Meet me in the linden wood midnight at the troll hytte, INGRID.

On the lake Sigrid was talkative.

"Do you think Ingrid is pretty?" she asked, abruptly.

"Yes," I said. "She's a pretty child."

"I think she's rather plain. Does she attract you?"

"She's very pleasant."

"She attracted a student I knew at Copenhagen University. He saw her here for two days and afterwards he wrote to her every week. Is it her innocence, do you think?"

I tried to divert this catechism by pointing to a group of swans, but Sigrid was not interested in swans.

"Ingrid is queer," she said, staring hard into my eyes.

Remembering the girl's unconventional entry to my room, I was inclined to agree with this.

"She should always be with Miss Thodorson."

"It seems a strange Swedish custom. Were you always with your governess when you were seventeen?" I asked jestingly.

Sigrid said nothing. Her face was hard with her passionate envy of her sister's beauty. We beached the boat among the reeds at the edge of the linden wood. Intently the swans watched us disembarking, their reptilian eyes gleaming a deep scarlet in the sunrays. Five minutes later Sigrid was showing me the troll's house.

*

*

*

THE lindens were enchanting in the moonlight as I set out for the hut shortly before midnight. I pushed my way through the undergrowth, caressed by leaves odorous with the spring night. My heart was throbbing violently. I wondered why I had decided to come. Meeting a schoolgirl at midnight was romantically redolent of the Christmas annuals; in reality it was ludicrous and a

little mirthful. But Ingrid was different. She was part of the moonlight. I stopped for breath and listened to the nightingales pouring forth their vigorous cadences. Each singer vied with his neighbour in intensive serenade. The cascades of magic sound echoed down the aisles of greenery. I soon approached the hut. Sigrid had unwittingly been an excellent guide. Unknown to her I had observed the leafy pathway carefully, while she recounted to me the misdeeds of the trolls.

Then I saw Ingrid standing at the entrance to the hut. She wore a coat of white flannel. Her lovely hair dominated the moonlight scene. I forgot the nightingales. She clasped my hands gently in greeting.

"I thought you did not come, Shaun," she whispered, drawing me to the seat.

"You're beautiful, Ingrid." I said, looking spellbound into her eyes.

"Sigrid does not think I am beautiful."

"I've forgotten Sigrid and her opinions. I could gaze at you always."

Ingrid was silent. I could see tears in her eyes.

"I wish I was like Sigrid," she murmured, and I thought she was railing at her youth. I learnt forward and kissed her lips and the tears vanished. She wove her fingers in mine. We sat and smiled at each other.

"I hate life often," she said, suddenly serious.

I laughed and burst forth like a pedagogue.

"You'll not always be a schoolgirl, Ingrid. You'll be free from your cage soon."

"I'll never be free, Shaun."

"Now you're behaving like the Lady of Shalott. You're the romantic sixth former again. Forget the world and listen to the nightingales."

"Sometimes, Shaun, they are—what you say? dumb."

We listened in silence to the birds. Then I gazed at Ingrid's lashes, which curved in a delightful frailty above the whiteness of her eyes. A small pulse beat slowly in her throat. I kissed it softly.

"I am a little happy now, Shaun."

"You should always be happy, Ingrid. Loveliness and happiness should go together."

Her fingers tightened their clasp a little.

"You will remember me after you have gone, Shaun?" she asked, with the tears again on her lashes.

"I'll send you a token," I said.

"What is that?"

"Something to make us remember. Which flower do you like best, Ingrid?"

"The white cyclamen—like butterflies' wings."

A startled look appeared in her eyes. She put her finger to her lips.

"Did you hear anything?"

We strained our ears for any sound and I thought I heard a twig breaking, but the long silence which followed was deep and reassuring.

"It's only the night breeze," I said.

"We must go back, Shaun."

Soon we left the hut and like wraiths in the moonlight threaded our way back through the

lindens. The nightingales had ceased singing. Once an owl floated buoyantly across our path and Ingrid, afraid, clung to me with the lightness of thistledown. I kissed her protectively. Cautiously we reached the yew hedge beneath the castle walls. The conservatory door was unlocked and we stepped lightly through it into the main building. All was quiet as we ascended the heavy-carpeted stairs.

I watched Ingrid disappear noiselessly into her room.

*

*

*

WHEN I entered the breakfast room next morning, Sigrid's father welcomed me genially. He was freshly shaven and his tweed coat smelt of tobacco ash. He had been inspecting the dairy. I braced myself to hear details of various grades of milk rippling off his tongue with well-meant effusiveness. As I poured out coffee the door opened and Sigrid came in. Her glance was cold with hatred and I knew that she was aware of my meeting with Ingrid. She ignored my greeting. I tried to make conversation. I spoke of Jersey kine to Sigrid's father while my thoughts were back in the linden wood. I was uncomfortable and felt at Sigrid's mercy. She was unforgiving: the loathing in her stare mesmerised me. I hated myself a little amid a chaos of disturbing emotions. I decided to make an excuse and to leave Malmo as soon as I decently could.

"The Scandinavian countries are very free of rinderpest," Sigrid's father was remarking zestfully.

To be rude was my only means of escape.

"I'll smoke a cigarette in the orchard," I said, boorishly, leaving the table with forced composure. Sigrid's eyes followed me sadistically to the door.

It was sunny in the orchard. The air was sweet from a diversity of blossom. I lit a cigarette and tried to collect my thoughts. I felt I was a cad to deceive Sigrid, but, I told myself, Sigrid was hard and jealous of nature. She could survive any deception. Would she retaliate against Ingrid?

I walked to and fro on the lush grass, pacing with subconscious care between the clumps of dandelion. Suddenly my eye was attracted by a whiteness on the green, visible through the tracery of blossom before me. I went towards it...

I found Ingrid lying there unconscious under the trees. A little thread of scarlet blood discoloured her chin. I could see her eyes, misty and cere, under the curving lashes. Her face, with the jaw clenched tightly, was cream-white in its pallor. I tore her dress open at the neck and lifted her in my arms. Miss Thodorson appeared as I was leaving the orchard. She cried out hysterically when she saw my burden.

"Again!—it is terrible!" she gasped. "Please do not say I was not present. They will send me away."

She resembled a vulture unnerved. I carried Ingrid through the conservatory to the drawing room where I placed her stricken loveliness amid the cushions on the sofa.

"Tell her mother," I shouted to the governess,

as I rubbed the girl's hands. The woman hurried away. A little sound, like that of a hunted animal, came from Ingrid's lips.

Soon the mother came and I perceived the despair in her glance as she kissed Ingrid's knowledgeless eyes. When I saw that the girl was recovering from her coma I left them together. As I crossed the hall I was aware of Sigrid standing motionless at the top of the stairs. I had to pass her to reach my room.

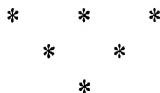
"Ingrid is ill," I mentioned self-consciously.

She looked at me steadily.

"Now you know why she should never leave Miss Thodorson, even in daylight," she said, her usually soft voice being vehement and hard with insinuation.

"You're a Viking all right," I shouted, returning her hatred. I brushed past her to my room and began to pack my clothes.

Three hours later I caught the 'plane from Malmo. In Copenhagen next day I found a pot of white cyclamen in a florist's. I sent it to Ingrid with love.



XXIX. LADY WITH SALUKI

IT was Galbraith's last week-end in town; his furlough was over and the following week he was going back to the North-West Frontier. It was necessary, therefore, that a good deal of elbow work should be got through in the brief interval before his return to regions honeycombed with arid nullahs and Pathan snipers.

At the party that Saturday night six of us effectively assisted Galbraith, in comradely fashion, to drown his sorrows. He enjoyed himself hugely—a *burra* to Galbraith is what an ant's egg is to a hungry goldfish. We restrained him from climbing the statue of Eros, and we pointed out that his wish to embrace a policewoman was not a praiseworthy desire in a *pukka sahib*.

It was 3 a.m. when the party broke up. Howard and I offered to escort Galbraith back to his Hertfordshire home.

"A delightful idea," commented Galbraith.

* * *

WE set out resolutely from a club in Soho. Galbraith, seated safely between us, was blithely attempting to demonstrate how a mallard could jink in the face of gunfire.

It had commenced to drizzle and the streets were treacherously greasy. Howard, the most cool-headed of the party, was driving Galbraith's car.

I was very sleepy myself—Galbraith's incoherent talks of shikar on the slopes of the Hindu Kush are at all times an infallible cure for insomnia.

I remember passing along deserted rainswept roads in the outer suburbs and I remember Galbraith indecorously singing *Swanee River*. Soon, however, a sense of melancholy seemed to enwrap us ; even Galbraith had subsided into silence.

A piscine dullness was already over that sahib's eyes and I guessed that the shape of things to come on the morrow was looming unpleasantly nearer in his outlook.

"An aspirin, Galbraith," I offered helpfully. Galbraith pushed aside the packet, laughing scornfully. "You chaps think I'm soused. S'ridiculous. There's no such thing."

Howard and I glanced indulgently at him.

"You chaps ever heard of Yogi mind-control ?" asked Galbraith. "Well, how can there be inso . . . insobriety, if one controls the mind ? Stands to reason."

"I think, Galbraith, that elbow control is more to the point in your argument," Howard said gently.

We allowed our sahib to sink back into the quietude he apparently derived from mind-control. We were somewhere near the by-pass by then. Then rain was falling heavily ; it was extremely dismal. My somnolence seemed to have transferred itself to Galbraith, whose head drooped drowsily on Howard's shoulder. I lit a cigarette.

Then suddenly I was jerked forward ; I heard a

hurried screeching of brakes and I realised that Howard had drawn up just in time. A woman and a dog were outlined in the headlights a few yards away. Howard cursed loudly :

“That damned woman and her Borzoi——”

“Saluki,” I corrected, to show how crystal-clear my faculties had become. I am being euphemistic when I say that Galbraith was asleep, and oblivious of the situation.

Howard and I were then surprised to see the woman holding up her hand, bidding us to wait. In her other hand she held the dog on a leash. She was hatless and wore a neat tailored dress. The headlights showed her as golden-haired and young. I could see immediately that she was pretty. The Saluki had a slim dignity.

“She’s lovely,” said Howard half to himself.

“She wants a lift,” I hazarded, adding facetiously : “Will some kind gentleman see me home ?”

“Would I be trespassing on your kindness if I requested you to give me and my dog a lift to the cross-roads ?” I heard a voice saying sadly, a voice as golden as the hair I had admired in the pool of light, a voice of good breeding, yet sad like the night. This could be no doubtful character. I opened the door quickly.

“Do jump in. There’s plenty of room at the back,” Howard and I chimed simultaneously.

“Thank you. You are very kind,” the voice whispered very faintly, like a little lost wind among the leaves.

*

*

*

NOISELESSLY as shadows, the stranger and her canine companion slipped into the back of the car. Howard stepped on the accelerator and we raced ahead. My eyes fell momentarily on the Saluki. I expected its coat to be dank and soaked with rain. I was therefore astonished to notice that it was apparently quite dry, as also was the lady's tailored dress.

Yet she possessed no umbrella. I could not understand this. We had not gone very far when my curiosity got the better of me.

"Didn't you get wet?" I asked the lady in a puzzled tone. There was no reply from the back of the car. Perhaps she had not heard. I turned right round.

"You aren't wet, madam?" I said, more loudly, feeling somehow that "madam" was the correct mode of address. I received no reply. The car was badly lit and I fancied the lady's eyes were closed. A very reserved passenger, I decided, or perchance a woman weary from exhaustion.

* * *

WE sped on through the drab night in silence. Once or twice I saw Howard glance towards our guests. No doubt he was as mystified as I was by the lady's unresponsiveness. She had not seemed standoffish when she had thanked us upon entering the car. The silence was uncanny. A moment later Howard spoke :

"We'll need some juice," he said.

"There's a station open all night just before the cross-roads," I told him.

At the foot of the by-pass I noticed that Galbraith showed signs of awaking from his slumber. I gave him a gentle nudge.

"Be on your best behaviour," I warned him, "We've got guests."

"Whassat you say?"

"We've got guests, old chap," hissed Howard. Galbraith surveyed us both with disdain.

"You're a pair of asses," he said contemptuously as he settled himself to sleep again.

Ahead I could now see the beacons at the petrol-station near the cross-roads. Within a minute Howard drove adroitly into the yards. An attendant in a white uniform was sitting in a small office behind the pumps. His face was sallow in the glare of two greenish-yellow arcs of light.

"Two gallons, please," Howard ordered.

As the man prepared the pipe I turned round again to our guests. I was going to ask the lady where exactly her destination was, and if we could drop her at any particular spot. Then I received a real shock.

The back of the car was empty!

"There's nobody there!" I shouted at Howard, whose glance followed mine.

"They didn't get out, I'm certain of it," he answered excitedly, and I could see the fear spreading in his eyes.

The attendant in the white uniform drained the last drops of petrol from the pump and came up cheerfully for payment. He was a tubby little man; his cheeks were ludicrously green in that

unnatural light. While Howard was producing the cash, he remarked chattily :

"Shocking tragedy last evening."

"What's that ?" I asked uneasily.

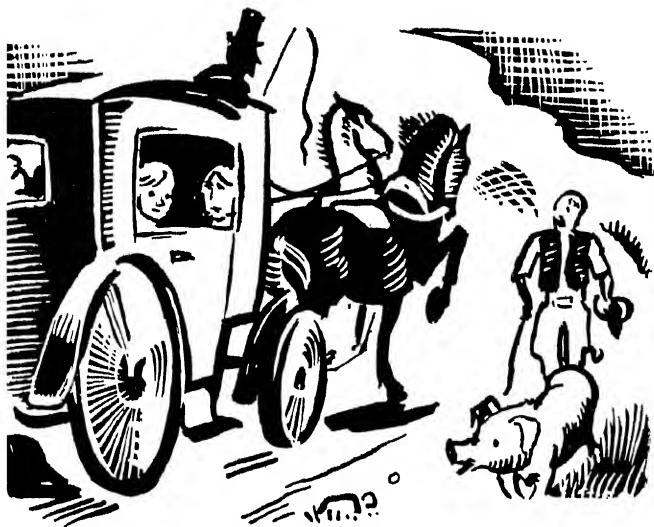
"Ain't you 'card ? Woman and dawg killed outright in the by-pass——"

I gazed at Howard ; his face was white and strained.

Galbraith then stirred himself heavily.

"Will you chaps let a fellow sleep in peace ?" he grunted.





XXX. TO MOUNT JEROME

I REMEMBER it was during Easter week 1916. I was sitting alone under the big chestnut tree at the bottom of the garden. It was sunny and the young leaves formed a pleasant maze of greenery above my head. I spent the time watching a missel-thrush and thinking of my birds' eggs and especially of the guillemot's one I had arranged to swap with Dermot when I returned to school.

I felt lonely in the garden then. They had purposely sent me there while relatives were collecting in the drawing room. "Get the child out of the way," Uncle Walter had whispered to Moira the

cook, who shepherded me into the garden and said :

“Be good, Sean, and you’ll have a lovely ride in a nice cab.”

Moirá was what Seamus, the gardener, called a ‘real flahool woman,’ kindly and with a bosom so big that I often wondered if it contained concealed scaffolding.

There were many people coming with us to Mount Jerome. All my aunts were there with long black gloves and dark plummy hats with intricate veils. They reminded me of jackdaws. Except for Aunt Pegeen, who always gave me a birthday present and five shillings every Shrove Tuesday, I disliked my aunts. They were uninteresting women who used condescendingly to pinch my cheeks and make remarks about my pale face.

After watching the missel-thrust for ten minutes I saw Piper, the cat, coming across the lawn with Seamus who was carrying a bunch of white lilies.

“D’ye hear that?” said Seamus stopping to listen. “They do be sayin’ poor Dublin’s being blew up by them Sherwood Forestiers.”

I became very excited when I heard the sound of the guns booming from the city seven miles away.

“Seamus, will we see the Sinn Feiners at the Post Office?” I inquired breathlessly as Piper purred against my legs.

“You will not now. You’ll be goin’ safe by the Donnybrook Road. You’ll be takin’ these for herself.”

"Is Mount Jerome a beautiful place, Seamus?" I asked tentatively as I took the lilies.

"It's a right lovely spot, me boyo. The *kevon kreestha* is upon it. Isn't me own cousin alyin' there, and she the gentlest Protestant in all Clonskea."

The rat-a-tat-tat of the machine guns echoed with staccato shrillness from the city.

"A fine ree-raa they're makin'," said Seamus.

"If I climed the big beech tree, Seamus, could I see the smoke of the burning beyond Booterstown?"

"Maybe. And the laddos at Boland's themselves a-wavin' the *Plough and the Stars* from the parapet 'an' all."

Seamus laughed and lit his pipe complacently, and I saw Moira coming towards us.

"Are ye ready, child?" she called out. "The cabs is come. You'll be goin' with your Aunt Pageen and your Uncle Walter."

Then I saw her step back and eye me with disdain.

"Is it a dirty hanky ye'll be flourishin' now? Have ye no respeck for the—Come, I'll be gettin' ye a proud clean piece."

As we walked across the grass I heard the big guns booming again from the city and I knew that the fighting there was more fierce than any since the days of Brian Boru. I felt my heart throbbing with excitement.

*

*

*

IN the drawing room I could see that Uncle Walter had been crying again. He was the only

one of them all, except for Mrs. Gogan, grandma's oldest friend, who showed his sorrow visibly. As he ate his toast and marmalade at breakfast I saw the tears trickling down his cheeks and I thought it a strange and wonderful thing for a middle-aged, bald-headed business man to be able to cry so. He was grandma's eldest son and a confirmed bachelor. He was not always melancholy ; he could sing and recite nicely. *I Brought my Harp to the Party, but Nobody Asked me to play* was his favourite piece.

The drawing room was hot and smelt of scent. My aunts were looking at me solemnly, a little antagonistic, and I heard one of them say to Aunt Pegeen :

"Sean's not very emotional, is he ?"

"He's very young. What can you expect ?" Aunt Pegeen retorted sharply as she patted me reassuringly on the back. I knew that they all expected me to be crying as I had cried the first two nights in bed, but I couldn't cry that way any more. At school Dermot had seen me crying when the headmaster had told me that grandma was dead, and I felt ashamed.

They were all coming out into the hall now. I saw Uncle Walter tapping the barometer and I knew he was hiding his feelings. Then the undertaker's men came out carrying the coffin. It was a very small coffin, and as grandma was very stout, it puzzled me that there should be room for her inside. I felt somehow that she could not be comfortable in it.

Aunt Pegeen then put her arm round me.

"You're coming with me, Sean, in the cab with the grey mare."

"Will we see the fighting, Aunt Pegeen?" I asked uncertainly. Aunt Pegeen nearly laughed and I could see my other aunts observing her with disapproval. I knew that they disliked her because she was pretty and wore nice clothes and could sing *The Snowy-Breasted Pearl* as well as play the piano with crossed hands.

Then Moira came up as we were leaving the front door. She patted me on the back.

"Don't be forgettin' the lilies, Sean, an' be a brave lad."

"Sean's looking nice in his black suit, Moira," said Aunt Pegeen, smiling at me affectionately.

Soon we were on the pavement and I saw five cabs lined up there. Mrs. Gogan was being helped into the last. The cabmen had very red hands and faces and their noses were bulbous and blue-veined. The horses stamped restlessly and were eager to set off. I wondered if they knew by heart the way to Mount Jerome Cemetery. I entered the cab with the grey mare and sat opposite to Aunt Pegeen and Uncle Walter. I remember that two passers-by raised their hats as we moved away from the kerb. Uncle Walter was very silent. I tried to avoid meeting his sorrowful eyes; I stared out of the window steadily as we went slowly along the Donnybrook Road. I saw a placard advertising Theda Bara at the cinema and I recollected that Dermot had told me his mother said Theda Bara played fast parts which I could

not understand though I knew Pearl White and Mary Pickford did not play such fast parts.

"It's turning out a nice sunny morning," said Aunt Pegeen.

"The missel-thrush has a nest in the tree near the green-house, Aunt Pegeen," I said.

"I hope Piper won't get at it."

"I'm watching him carefully and Scamus has promised to watch him when I go back to school."

Accidentally I looked at Uncle Walter's eyes. His sadness made me turn to speak to Aunt Pegeen immediately.

"Do you think the fighting will be over soon, Aunt Pegeen? Dermot said his father nearly saw a sniper on the Bank of Ireland."

Aunt Pegeen smiled. A moment later she took Uncle Walter's hand and pressed it gently in her black glove.

"It's kind of Mrs. Gogan to come," she said, but Uncle Walter was still silent. Mrs. Gogan and grandma had known each other for sixty years. Once every fortnight they used to go by cab into the city to shop and eat a lobster lunch in Duke Street. Occasionally in the holidays I went with them and Mrs. Gogan bought me nougat, so I liked her though I was a little afraid of her man's voice and the hair on her upper lip. Often in the long summer evenings grandma and Mrs. Gogan would sit knitting together in the garden until the parliament of rooks assembled in the big beech tree and sunset approached. Grandma and Mrs. Gogan seemed to be able to understand each other with-

out talking. Mrs. Gogan sometimes told me exciting stories. She had once heard the banshee in County Mayo.

*

*

*

THE cab swayed over the cobblestones and the noise made it impossible for me to hear the rattle of gunfire from the city, but I was exhilarated to be going towards the scene of the trouble, even if it was by a safe road. I would be able to tell Dermot that I had almost seen the battle.

We were surely right in the city now, for trams passed us in the streets, ugly yellow trams with clanging bells and raucous brakes. 'The curse of Dublin' grandma used to say about them as they jangled past her cab on her fortnightly shopping excursions.

Suddenly I began to think of the missel-thrush's nest again. I wondered if Seamus would be lazy and forget to watch Piper. I hoped the funeral would be over quickly so that I could see for myself that the nest was safe.

Then, for the first time, Uncle Walter spoke.

"I told Moira we'd have the reading in the dining-room. Sherry and biscuits."

I thought his voice sounded very melancholy.

"That'll be best," said Aunt Pegeen. I knew they were alluding to the Will, as I had heard Moira telling Seamus that they would read it when we returned from Mount Jerome. Aunt Pegeen smiled at me.

"Are you tired, Sean? It's a long journey."

"The last journey," said Uncle Walter, sadly

and mysteriously to himself.

"I hope Mrs. Gogan is comfortable " said Aunt Pegeen.

"Will they have music at Mount Jerome, Aunt Pegeen ?"

"They'll play a nice hymn."

"*The King of Love ?*"

"Perhaps."

I turned round and watched the grey mare's tail bushy like a giant squirrel's moving up and down to the slow rhythm of her trot. The cab had a horsey, musty smell. I could see the edges of the cabby's whiskers from where I sat. Sometimes he turned sideways and spat strongly, hardly opening his lips, and then wiped his mouth with a bright red handkerchief. I wished I was able to spit as vigorously and with as little effort as he spat.

Aunt Pegeen looked very handsome in her black dress. I was always proud of her when she came to sports days at school. I was also secretly glad that none of my other aunts came ; they were not really presentable even when dressed up in their best.

"I'm swopping my guillemot's egg with Dermot," I told Aunt Pegeen, "for six Borneo stamps and some nougat."

"We'll go to Ireland's Eye in the summer," said Aunt Pegeen, "you'll see plenty of guillemots there."

"Razorbills," grunted Uncle Walter abruptly, surprising us both by joining in the conversation.

The cabs were turning into a big gateway now,

and I guessed that we had reached Mount Jerome. I noticed avenues of low yew trees appearing, neat and tidy, as if they had been clipped by a scissors. As the cab began to draw up, I saw the great sadness returning to Uncle Walter's eyes. Between the yew trees there were huge marble tomb stones and graves with faded flowers on them. I felt for my lilies and found them on the floor of the cab. We had stopped outside a building where a clergyman was standing on the steps with a prayer book in his hand.

"Now, Sean, be polite and run along and help Mrs. Gogan out of the cab. I know she'd appreciate it," said Aunt Pegeen as she settled her veil.

I got out and hurried along past the cabs which contained my aunts.

"It's nice and sunny for the ceremony," I heard one of them saying. The cabby of Mrs. Gogan's carriage was just about to open the door as I reached it.

"I'll help Mrs. Gogan out" I told him, a little rudely.

"Musha, it's a fine flunkey ye'd make," he said, smiling kindly and blowing through his fingers.

I opened the door.

"May I help you out, Mrs. Gogan?" I asked politely, but Mrs. Gogan did not answer.

"Maybe it's snoozin' she is," said the cabby.

I looked into the cab and I saw Mrs. Gogan's face very white and still in the shadows. The cabby stared in over my shoulder. Then he put his head inside the door.

"We're there, ma'am," he announced respectfully.

I saw his eyes grow troubled when he received no reply.

Mrs. Gogan's face was as white as a ghost's.

"Bejabers, the old lady's gone," the cabby said in a whisper.

I ran back quickly to find Aunt Pegcen.



XXXI. NINA

IT was ten years since I had seen her, and her presence on board brought back a vivid memory of a Marseilles nocturne. She was standing beside her stall on the lower deck. Around her the Japanese crew stalked to and fro with a calm geniality. Facing her, the hatchways presented a scene of ant-like confusion and activity. We were loading at night. On all sides stalwart, tawny-skinned coolies worked with strenuous self-negation amidst the glare of the great arc-lights. Beyond, on the boat-deck, the second and third class passengers gazed enwrap while the heavy cargoes of Osaka-bound steel girders were swung aloft with sure mechanical precision, to be lowered into the gaping depths of the hold.

Seated alone at her stall, Mrs. Ohara surveyed the scene out of weary eyes. I watched her as I had done ten years before. She had the saddest of faces—*triste* would be too light a word to describe it. I remembered her vividly, though it was not the vision of herself which has so indelibly stamped itself upon my memory. My chief recollection was of a hollow-cheeked Japanese and an oval-faced girl aged twelve. They were Mrs. Ohara's husband and daughter. Ten years before I had bought a bottle of perfume from their stall, and the breath-taking beauty of the child had held my

attention for the rest of the evening.

The Oharas never pestered any of the passengers for custom. Their chief patrons were among the crew, who relished the cheap brilliantines, the aphrodisaics, and the excessively odorous perfumes displayed with true showmanship by Mrs. Ohara upon the deck. They also regarded Nina Ohara, the little girl, as a type of mascot, and even the lowliest of the Japanese deckhands had a jovial word for her. The Captain, by whose special permission the exiled Ohara was permitted to trade on board, had a special quip for her on each trip.

In appearance the child was lanky, but her long legs had a grace which intensified the half-Mongoloid symmetry of her body. Her hair was dark and bobbed, and kissed her high cheek-bones severely in true Chinese style. Her complexion was palely bronze ; her long-lashed eyes were most fascinating in their scarcely perceptible obliqueness. The parental mixture of East and West had produced an offspring of the rarest beauty. It was a strange union, some random details of which were described to me by a ship's officer ten years before. Mrs. Ohara, I learnt, was an Irish girl who came to Marseilles as a dancer in a cabaret, the members of which soon became stranded. Desperate, she found work in a bar near the Vieux Port, where she made the acquaintance of Ohara, then an attractive youth in the service of a barber in the dock area. Like several of the Marseillais women, the Irish girl found that the Asiatic Ohara cast a

spell which was denied to most members of the Latin races, passionate as they were in many instances. Ohara, too, was genuinely attracted by her. There was no question of the affair being just a mutually transient infatuation. At the end of six months' close company they were married at a registry office and found two rose-papered rooms in a mistral-swept tenement street adjacent to the docks. Mrs. Ohara continued to work in the bar. Her meagre earnings considerably helped to furnish the home. They bought a window-box of geraniums, a Maltese canary—whose shrill cadences re-echoed through the sordid backyards in an exaltation of song—and a cat with the comfortable countenance immortalised by Ohara's Parisianised compatriot, the artist, Foujita.

Then, a couple of months after her marriage. Mrs. Ohara became pregnant. This was a blow where her work at the bar was concerned. She knew a compulsory absence from work would mean the loss of her position. And so it turned out. A buxom Provençal was installed in her place, and Ohara's wages were henceforth the sole support of the household. After the child was born, Mrs. Ohara attempted to find work again, but with the exception of one offer—the post of waitress in a *Blue Cinema*, with its attendant prostitution—nothing came her way. She found the time dragged heavily now that she was compelled to lounge about the two rooms of her abode. In the summer the hot winds from the gulf made the place a stifling prison: in winter the mistral

necessitated the use of newspapers as an additional bed-covering. The child, too, was troublesome. There were times when Mrs. Ohara must have longed for the much-maligned streets of her birth-place—Dublin, and for the possession of an apostrophe in her name.

After a couple of years, her husband showed obvious signs of deteriorating. At night he left her alone, preferring the company of the Lascar stevedores in the quayside taverns. His attendance at Adolphe's, the barber's, grew more irregular, his standard of work less efficient, until finally the proprietor gave him a week's wages and ordered him to keep his face clear of the establishment for ever after. The shock of dismissal sobered the Japanese, whose youth was already contaminated by the effects of his dissolute habits. They were now in a desperate plight, since the occasional wage earned by Ohara as a stevedore was insufficient to buy him a night's alcohol.

At last Mrs. Ohara in her despair approached the individual captains of the big Japanese liners which berthed close by her home. In each case permission was given for herself and Ohara to board the ship and trade in perfume and trinkets during the vessels' short stay in port. Ohara was a distressed countryman, and the Japanese are as clannish as the Caldeonians are in exile. Thus a bare living was gained from the intermittent custom of passengers and the dependable patronage of the crews. It was Mrs. Ohara who bargained for and selected the goods in the more shoddy

Marseilles wholesalers. It was she who did the selling, while Ohara chatted with his compatriots on the well-deck, playing *Goh* and *mahjongg* with listless enjoyment. His youth had gone : his eyes were a greasy yellow and his body sagged from wayward living. Nevertheless he was still a passionate husband ; there were periods when a truce was apparent between husband and wife. Mrs. Ohara ceased temporarily to behave as the virago which her husband's *laissez-faire* had forced her to become. Nina—who was now at an inquisitive stage—realised that these periods occurred only when her mother slept away from her. On these occasions she was left alone in the parlour with the sleeping canary as sole companion. Often she lay awake long into the night while the mice scuttled up and down the wainscotting. The silence in the next room penetrated into her thoughts with a sense of adolescent wonder.

But these intervals of normality between her parents grew less frequent as the dreary months rolled by. Her mother's tongue gained in uncontrolled venom. Sometimes her father, for whom she had a more definite natural liking than she had for her mother, struck his wife savagely in order to silence her bickering speech. He would use a coarse Japanese expression and fling out of the tenement to seek the riotous consolation to be found in the least reputable of the taverns in the Vieux Port. Human derelicts and blousy prostitutes became his companions. His wife knew of his infidelity with the molls of the backstreets, for

the carmine imprints of their lips were often clearly imprinted, like transfer marks, on his cheeks and neck, when he returned unsteadily to the household at daylight. Mrs. Ohara was too occupied in earning a living to object to these diversions. Nina knew that her father had been in prison more than once for theft and disorderly behaviour in the Cannebiere : she knew, too, that he had lost three fingers in a scuffle with a negro dockhand ; that he suffered from disease and had become an irretrievable ne'er-do-well. Yet she had an inherent fondness for him and he, in his sober moments, could be strangely kind and affectionate towards her. She appreciated the little presents—unwholesome sweetmeats and valueless trinkets—which he gave to her, for her hardworking mother never bestowed gifts upon her. Her father's caresses had warmth ; they were never absently perfunctory and coldly dutiful as those of *maman* were. Because of her predominant Asiatic strain, Nina loved her father and was unafraid of him at his worst moments.

*

*

*

ALL this the ship's officer had described in such a fashion that the Ohara *menage* became a thing of interest to me. And now, ten years after, as I watched Mrs. Ohara at her stall, the vision of the daughter's haunting beauty and the drink-sodden figure of Ohara emerged clearly from the recesses of my memory. The sad eyes of Mrs. Ohara reflected the troubled passage of the years. I wondered what had become of Nina and her father,

and decided to satisfy the pangs of idle curiosity by questioning my friends, Mr. Kai, the purser. I found him in the clutches of a group of tourists who formed a non-extinct verbal volcano.

"We've been rec-commended to getta view of Signor Caruso's mausoleum at Naples...he's sure embalmed they say..."

Mr. Kai escaped eventually from this lava-flow of words, beaming with full Japanese tact and politeness. I cornered him and fired my enquiries at him. Where was Nina Ohara and her father? The purser's expression changed to startled surprise.

"She is dead, sir. You remember her? She was a pretty girl."

"And her father?"

"Dead, too. He was hanged for murder six or seven years ago."

The expression on the purser's countenance showed clearly that he expected an explosion of interrogation on my part. With difficulty I refrained from displaying a tourist-like amazement, thereby encouraging the purser to unfold the history of the Ohara family. He was by no means ashamed that his countryman had been hanged, so I gauged that the events were sensational enough to overcome any sense of reticence, and to give rein to that natural flow of gossip which is an instinct inherited from maternal sources in every Japanese home. With his details allied to my own impression—a ten year old nocturne—I was able to piece together the story. Mr. Kai asked me whether I remembered Kim, the second-class deck

steward on the trip ten years ago—and with the sound of the name, the remaining member of the drama was brought back to memory.

For Kim had been well-known on the boat. He was a favourite with the female passengers in the second class, whom he had instructed at the more intricate deckgames with an artless fascination of manner. He was particularly handsome for a Japanese, and taller than most of his race. His slow smile would have charmed any woman. The easy grace and attractively panther-like movements of his muscular body immediately caught the attention of the female passengers.

Eight years before—the purser told me—there had been a *sukiyaki* celebration amongst the crew while the ship was in port. The participants formed a kimono-clad group on the well-deck. There were nine or ten of them—mostly stewards with a night's leave ashore. Much *saki* was consumed, and at ten o'clock Ohara and his daughter joined the party. She was fourteen then; her mother had attempted to make her go to bed, but she had persuaded her father to bring her back for *sukiyaki* to the ship. It was merry there. When their stomachs were well-filled with rice and their senses stirred with the warm *saki*, the men were in the mood for singing the love-songs of their native land. This was impossible on board. Led by Kim, the deck-steward, they trooped ashore to one of the numerous bars in Sailor's Alley. Each had brought a supply of *saki* which was supplemented by beer and cheap wines. To Nina it was

truly a special occasion. As she listened to the strange ditties crooned by the men, a still stranger delight leapt in her youthful veins. Although she had never been further away from Marseilles than the Chateau D'If, her instincts were essentially Japanese.

She swayed to the raucously voluptuous music. Next to her sat the handsome Kim, and opposite, fast becoming drunk, reclined her father. One of the men was performing a burlesque of a hip-dance, prinking in accentuated geisha-fashion. Another was singing a classical Japanese love-song—the purest of poetry to the nationals present, but, from the point of view of the French bar-tender, reminiscent of the sounds made by a person suffering from mal-de-mer. Nina loved it all. At first her father had forbidden her to drink any *saki*, then, becoming drowsier and more maudlin, he was no longer aware of her presence. Her neighbour, Kim, handed her a saucer filled with the national liquid which she sipped in childish exhilaration. The spirits of the bronzed seamen around her were increasing in boisterousness. In the ill-lit atmosphere of the tavern the contours of their mobile faces appeared out of the shadows like Puckish brown demons convulsed with merriment. Everywhere the stainless ivory of their teeth caught the eye. Nina felt that there was something harmless and childish about her father's countrymen; she was drawn to them and did not fear them as she feared the negroes and dagoes of the Vieux Port back streets—creatures who would

leer at her with lustful thoughts welling forth from their eyes.

In spite of the noise created by the chorus of rhythmical handclapping which accompanied the songs in the customary Japanese style, Ohara had fallen asleep in a corner of the sawdust-strewn saloon. Nina knew from experience that nothing could interrupt her father's drunken torpor, even the vituperations of her mother were of no avail in such circumstances. Besides her, the good-looking Kim had undergone a metamorphosis. The *saki* and beer combined had dulled his laughter. He became morosely silent. His hands ceased to beat time to the rhythm of the voices. By degrees Nina grew abnormally aware of his nearness. He was watching her quietly. When she looked back into his steady brown eyes he smiled slowly at her, and she knew that he was handsomer than any man she had ever seen. Then he spoke——

"I'm not drunk, Nina."

She laughed, and he hiccoughed and said:—

"Come with me, girlic, I'll take you home."

His eyes mesmerized hers, so that she rose obediently without being aware of her movements. Kim's eyes were like those of a snake...the hot, pleasant odour of his person was in her nostrils. He caught hold of her arm and they left the tavern. Out in the street she noticed that he was unsteady in his gait. A tramcar was rattling towards them over the cobbles at the immense speed characteristic of the dockyard tramways. Ignoring her suggestion that they should take it, Kim led her up a

narrow sidestreet where only a stray bitch was exploring the garbage in the gutter. Above their heads masses of drying clothes were spread from window to window in the ephemeral moonlight. In the deserted stillness she could hear Kim's hoarse breathing. She did not fear him...Kim, the deck-steward whom she had known as a friendly stranger for several years. On each voyage he had jocularly caressed her hair with his hand and given her sweets. Then, suddenly, she felt his arms thrust around her. Through her frail cotton dress she sensed his body pressed close against her own. He began to kiss her passionately.

"You're beautiful, Nina."

She clung to him in the darkness. He brought her into a tenement doorway and they lay together on the ground. She had never been in a strange man's arms before, yet she had a vague feeling that all this had happened before—in some other life. This deep ecstasy was both new and old. She returned Kim's hot kisses. She was happy.

*

*

*

IN the autumn of the same year, the Japanese liner again berthed in the Marseilles dock. The sad-faced Mrs. Ohara was among the first to board the vessel. In a short time she was plying her trade, selling her scented soaps to the crew. She had left her husband at home, mildly drunk on the grease-worn sofa beneath the canary's cage. His help as an assistant had ceased to be of any worth to her. He frequently suffered from delirium tremens, and she was forced to support him in a

remote, mechanical manner. She was invariably glad of his absence.

But Ohara on this occasion had not remained long alone in the rose-papered tenement room. He made his way to the ship and boarded it uncertainly. It was not to the well-deck for gambling that he went this time. One object was paramount in his clouded brain. He was coming to search for the steward called Kim. His senses brightened as his quest began. Through each passage way he slunk furtively with a cold hatred in his gaze. He paraded the first-class accommodation and passed on into the kitchens. Then he returned to the stern of the ship. He found a bar-steward and enquired for his friend Kim. The bar-steward winked and told him that the handsome deck-steward was in cabin number eight, making music for a foreign lady passenger. Ohara simulated amusement. Five minutes later he approached the cabin in question. The music of a flute therein was punctuated by an outburst of laughter. For a moment Ohara stood motionless at the door with every nerve strained. His bowels stirred threateningly; the pulses in his temples beat with an increasing insistence. Dexterously quiet, he turned the handle of the door. It was bolted. He knocked temperately.

"Message from purser," he said.

Someone was coming to open it...

Immediately the door was unlocked, Ohara burst into the cabin and found himself confronting the steward Kim. A flute was in his hands. Be-

hind him, on the lower berth, a flaxen-haired woman of middle-age, clad in her negligé, stared forth from incredulous eyes. Her chin was lost amid curves of irrelevant flesh as it jerked upwards in an attitude of haughty indignation.

"How dare you intrude——"

But Ohara paid no attention to her angry protest. He drew an automatic from his pocket. The woman screamed, while a wave of terror passed across the steward's face. The flute dropped from his hands. He recognized the incensed Ohara, whose features were transformed to a demoniacal leer as he met his gaze. A sadistic delight overwhelmed the man in the doorway. It was his look, rather than the levelled automatic, which created such terror in the steward. Suddenly Ohara's hollow voice filled the cabin. He was addressing the woman politely :

"Madam, I am forced to kill your friend."

The calm fury of his tone caused the steward to gibber from fear. The woman hid her face hysterically.

"Remove your shirt," she heard the intruder command.

"Madam, your lipstick."

Swiftly Ohara took her reticule from the couch and extracted the tube of cosmetic.

"He has a fine chest, madam," he shouted as he tore away the shirt from the body of the trembling Kim. Naked, the steward's handsomeness dominated the heated cabin. His perfect white teeth chattered from terror. A plea for mercy

broke from his lips.

"Permit me," said Ohara, approaching his victim with the levelled revolver in one hand, the lipstick in the other. With a couple of delicately swift strokes of the latter he sketched the outline of a heart on the steward's chest.

"It is the sign of love, madam," he added suavely, surveying his artistry. Then he scribbled a series of Japanese characters across the man's stomach.

"Madam, my Nina is dead. That is why I shoot this man through the heart."

Ohara laughed. A shot rang out. The terrified woman on the lower berth screamed with unmusical violence. When she uncovered her eyes, she saw the body of Kim lying in a crumpled mass across the cabin floor.

Ohara was speaking calmly. A thin, wraith-like wisp of smoke curled upwards from the weapon in his hand.

"Here is my revolver, madam. Will you kindly summon the gendarmes? The bell is behind you..."



XXXII. DEATH OF PTOLEMY

I AM aware that a number of the inmates of this genteel establishment regard me—the only male in the place—as a querulous, decrepit creature. Others look upon me as the embodiment of a mysterious wisdom. (Years ago I was nicknamed Solon by a facetious blue-stocking and the designation has endured). Some, a little afraid of me, would patronizingly acknowledge my sagacity with a casual pat on the back if I were to give them any sign of encouragement. They are steely, quick-witted folk, these dowagers. I can see their criticisms reflected in their predatory eyes as they hasten in to claim their share of the hearth after dinner in the winter evenings. Through well-poised lorgnettes many of them survey me with obvious disdain. I am too old, too sedentary to arouse their sympathies. One or two of these females, I can see, consider me as a rake who has at last forsaken his sins, whereas the reality is that my sins long ago forsook me.

In the summer certain of these acidulated persons migrate to Bournemouth and Torquay and I have a much-appreciated measure of peace. Kensington, you should know, is a melancholy place in the summer twilights. The thrush—poor forlorn bird!—that sings in the sooty plane trees before my window conveys an infectious sadness in his

song. The polemical sparrows, punctuating the dull undertone from the High Street's traffic, incessantly irritate me with their meddlesome chatter. Possibly, because of my senility, I am oversensitive in these matters. I am very easily rubbed up the wrong way nowadays which, I take it, is one of the disadvantages of old age.

I have, however, my memories which can so effectively absorb me as to form a barrier rendering me impervious to the aggravating knitting needles of the dowagers and the accipitrine raucousness of the bridge-playing clique. It is my valued habit to gaze reminiscently into the burning coals, nostalgically forming pictures in the fire. Not particularly exciting pictures, for Kensington has been my habitat all my life, and the least-damning praise I can give to the Royal Borough is to say that I long ago became inured to it—to its street-cries and its matutinal milk-carts (which have always somehow attracted me) to its purposeful females parading to the sales in the big emporiums, to its beggars and its barrel-organs—I was never musical in the accepted sense but, through sheer familiarity with it, I believe I could almost give a rendering of *The Blue Danube*, and how that would surprise my '*betes noires*' the dowagers!

I derive a full contentment from these pictures in the flames. Fond memories of my youth lull me into a pleasant drowsiness, a moribund condition which often lingers until after the last dowager has departed to her bottle-warmed bed and the landlady, Mrs. Moon, comes in to glance at me a

little apprehensively by way of indication that my time for retirement is at hand. She is a gentle woman, Mrs. Moon, soft-voiced and very considerate to old age. For many years now she has looked after my wants in a most praiseworthy manner. Were it not for her kindness, boarding house life would have been a heart-breaking existence.

* * *

LAST night I was meditating idly on the days of my youth when, for no especial reason, I suddenly thought of Ptolemy. Some haphazard image amongst the burning coals evidently struck a chord of memory in my brain, for I fancied I could clearly see Ptolemy's broad, bewhiskered countenance among the pictures in the fire. My comfortable drowsiness left me immediately. I became inordinately alert. Such a vision was strange, since Ptolemy has been dead for a long time, indeed I have not given him a thought for many years.

Ptolemy—and that was a foolish title he acquired in his City days (I believe he originally came from somewhere salubrious near Billingsgate)—was young and handsome when I first made his acquaintance. I cannot say that I ever liked him. We were covertly antagonistic at our first meeting. He was somewhat of a braggart about his success amongst females and took his charms too much for granted. When he first came to reside in Kensington it was autumn in this square. I remember quite clearly the golden leaves falling and eddying along the pavements in fits and starts

so that one often mistook them for frightened mice. I became interested in Ptolemy and watched him daily. It was his custom to take a postprandial walk in the gardens in the centre of the square. I'll admit that he was an imposing, well-groomed, though slightly too gross figure as he strolled leisurely along the pathways amongst the beds of dahlias and chrysanthemums. Even the black-birds seeking for worms in the dewy grass seemed to cast an interested eye in his direction. But, as I have said, I never liked him and could not admire him. He was too much the bullying type and I distrusted him instinctively. He was, I considered, the epitome of smugness.

At that period I was robust and gay and quite immersed in the joys of courting a delightful young thing named Flora. She lived in one of the private houses on the other side of the square and enchanted me from the start. I was madly infatuated. She had lovely blue eyes, reddish hair and an equable disposition. Every morning and sometimes in the evenings I met her in the gardens under the plane trees. We would examine the rockery together. The soft loamy earth and the scents of the season intoxicated me and even led Flora into a fey mood. It was undoubtedly a case of youth appealing to youth. If, by any chance, Flora did not appear in the gardens I felt unsettled for the rest of the day. I think I even lost my appetite, a very rare occurrence for me in those times, I can assure you.

I was usually full of '*joie-de-vivre*' but my

natural exuberance was always well-controlled. I seldom went—as you might say—‘on the tiles’ as our friend Ptolemy was accustomed to do. His reputation in the square was none too good. He was, of course, a born philanderer. More than one of the staid Kensington landladies eyed him with suspicion and it was well-known that doors were often hurriedly closed at his approach.

*

*

*

It came to pass about that time that I missed seeing Flora for three consecutive days. I was wholly distracted. My appetite vanished completely. The most delectable dishes—such as enticing fresh salmon—made no appeal to my palate. I walked desperately up and down the gardens in the vain hope that Flora would appear. Distraught, I glanced continually towards the facade of her residence. I began to fear that I had been too precipitate, that I had committed a ‘*faus pas*’ by being too openly amorous and that thus, maybe, I had hurt Flora’s susceptibilities. I knew that the people she lived with were narrow-minded and rigidly watched her exits and entrances. But an absence of three days was unaccountable. On the third melancholy evening, as I was sitting near my window at dusk, gazing with extreme gloom towards a clump of copper beeches in the gardens, I received one of the major shocks of my life. For there, ambling through the rockery, was Flora accompanied by that gross braggart, Ptolemy!

It was Ptolemy all right; I immediately recognized his black coat and haughty gait. Ptolemy

with my Flora ! The sight 'put my back up,' as the vulgar phrase goes. Without a moment's hesitation I ran out of the house and swiftly crossed the road. The garden entrance on our side of the square was already locked but I nimbly leaped over the low railing and walked with grave determination towards the pair. Inwardly I was boiling with anger. My advent took them both completely by surprise. Flora, whom I had so mistakenly always thought of as faithful to me, eyed me guiltily with startled surprise while Ptolemy bridled arrogantly towards me. It is no exaggeration to say that there was a tiger-like ferocity in his eyes. He emitted a low snarl of fury and Flora, with evident fear, hastily withdrew herself from the scene.

*

*

*

THEN it all happened in the blinking of an eyelid. Ptolemy sprang at me with uncontrolled fury. I retaliated with a blow to the right side of his face, which I followed up instantly with a quick left. This display of fisticuffs successfully retarded his onset. But in a moment he was upon me again and locked together we fell to the ground. Chaotically we rolled over on the soft turf, Ptolemy's fine black coat soon becoming as bedraggled as a fourth-hand fur. We were oblivious of everything in that mad tussle. I received a nasty blow over one of my eyes but, on the other hand, Ptolemy's left ear was scratched and bleeding. The combat had already excited the attention of the dwellers in the adjacent residential hotels.

With enquiring glances obese cooks and pallid undermaids arose from basement quarters while, above, elderly spinsters clad in discreet night-shirts showed themselves in attic windows. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a policeman approaching at the other side of the railings. He commenced to shout at us but we were far too occupied to pay any attention to the law in such a crisis. Ptolemy, you should know, was a lusty antagonist, though, without any intention of being boastful, I may say that I was his match in every way. I followed up every little advantage and brought my strong left swing into action with good effect. Soon I could see that the strain of his extra weight was telling upon him. He snarled at me savagely and attempted a flanking movement. I parried this adroitly and landed a perfect blow in the centre of his forehead. He reeled momentarily from the impact : I could see the light of despair in his eyes. Then, before you could turn a hair, he beat a hasty retreat towards the tall chestnut tree in the middle of the gardens. The policeman was still shouting vociferously at us and the menials still gazed at us with bovine excitement. The spinsters in the attics—enough to make a cat laugh !—gave us their strained attention. They had never before experienced such a fracas in that respectable neighbourhood. I believe that encounter I had with Ptolemy has since become historic in Kensington. Landladies are even presumed to reckon the passage of events as dating before or after Ptolemy's death.

For Ptolemy died that night !

He had taken refuge high up in the chestnut tree and was contenting himself with hurling abusive taunts at me when suddenly there was a tremendous crashing amidst the foliage and his body came hurtling violently to the ground. In his weakness Ptolemy, that prowler in the moonlight, had lost his grip——

*

*

*

It was a terrifying moment. People say that we cats have nine lives—a dubious assertion !—but I guess that Ptolemy must have exhausted his quota. I can see the agony on his face to this day. I shudder when I recollect the scene and draw myself closer to the comfortable embers.

I am weary now. It is getting late and the fire is dwindling ; the last dowager has retired to bed. I think I hear Mrs. Moon approaching.

“Come now, Solon,” she will say, in her soft, understanding voice, “its time for your bedtime stroll.”